Summary

Immediately following the events of The Last Jedi, the battle for the galaxy continues between the First Order and the last of the Resistance. As the new Supreme Leader takes the throne, the First Order is focused on finding and destroying all who oppose them. The Resistance had disappeared into hiding and desperation has forced them to explore the gray areas of war. Meanwhile, on opposite sides of the war, Rey and Kylo Ren are forced to face the realities of their bond, their complicated relationship, their loyalty to their causes, and their understanding of the Force. Could their star-crossed connection be tied to the fate of the galaxy?

Notes

This is the slowest slow burn to ever slow burn! Enemies to friends to lovers. This story continues the arcs and themes beautifully woven through the Last Jedi, as well as continues...
the narrative from the previous two trilogies. All plot elements are intended to be canon-compliant in the Star Wars universe through TLJ. This is 100% completed. I want to thank my betas Meauxwalk and ReadingAlltheBest, who have gone above and beyond to help. I also want to thank the readers who took the time to read this and leave such beautiful comments. I appreciate you all.

For questions regarding ratings, triggers, spoilers, or just to stop in and say hello, email me at EdenWoodsParker@protonmail.com.

Update 17/2/20 - This is the (original) E rated version. There is a T rated version I'm uploading (about six chapters per day). Find it here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/22766263/chapters/54401605.

Update 18/3/20 - Thank you to my sister Wren for the picture collages for each chapter.

Update 24/3/20 - Para mis lectores españoles, por favor vean esta increíble traducción de Force Destiny por Girlfantasia en Wattpad -https://www.wattpad.com/story/216205978
Hi, making your way through the dusty corners of the internet, you've stumbled upon Force Destiny! I started this shortly after TLJ, and it definitely took longer than expected to finish. I tried to adhere as closely to the themes and arcs I noticed in TLJ, as well as the OT and PT. I just needed to get this all out as it dealt with some very personal topics for me. I'm sorry about the format, I am unenlightened to the ways of social media and barely figured out how to post this. Thank you to the talented Meauxwalk and ReadingAlltheBest for their brilliant help as betas. I appreciate you so much! Thank you to my readers, especially the ones that have stuck with me as I slowly posted this. Enjoy!

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away…

The FIRST ORDER had been weakened with the recent command acquisition by Kylo Ren, resulting in the unlikely escape of the RESISTANCE from what should have been a certain victory for the FIRST ORDER in their mission to seize military control of the galaxy.

Despite the victory, Leia Organa’s RESISTANCE was in shambles. After suffering extensive losses at the Battle of Crait, the remaining members narrowly escaped with the aid of Rey’s growing Force powers. Fleeing through hyperspace aboard the Millennium Falcon, they were in search of a new base, safe from the reaches of the FIRST ORDER.
Following the loss of Jedi Master Luke Skywalker and Supreme Leader Snoke, the fate of the galaxy was left in the hands of two young Force-users who shared a vital secret. Rey, the last hope for the RESISTANCE, and Kylo Ren, the dark lord of the FIRST ORDER, both sought to recover and rally their fracturing causes before they clashed in the final battle for the fate of the galaxy...
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See the end of the chapter for more notes
I'll destroy her.

Kylo Ren stormed down the dark corridor of the Finalizer, returning to his private chambers after their failure – his failure – to decimate the Resistance on Crait. Five hundred and seventy-two more steps until he reached the refuge of the small space in the galaxy that was truly his. He could finally be alone. Ironic, that he held the entire galaxy in his grasp, yet a few walls and a bed were somehow the only part left that felt his own. That sentiment disgusted him, but it was a weakness he could train out of himself easily enough.

As Supreme Leader, he had a choice of any quarters in the ship, of course. The general's quarters were more spacious and centralized in location; he could demand that Hux relinquish them to him, and he would feel no remorse in vacating the old ones. There were far more significant disputes, however, to engage in with his general. It had nothing to do with his sentiment; it was practical. His quarters suited him fine and provided him an advantage. Hidden away, they added an extra obstacle to Hux's constant tabs on him. Four hundred and two more steps – closer to his place to shut out the galaxy and farther from his failures on Crait.

At first, he had been consumed with short-sighted, foolish despair when she had shut him out. Then his father's dice had disappeared, reminding him that he was alone again. No, not again; he had always been alone. It should have been painful, but all he felt was... relief. As the light inside him flickered out, he was hit with a liberating realization; the light he had felt inside himself had been hers, not his. When she shut out the bond, she had shut out the light.

Kneeling in supplication – and defeat – in that base on Crait and alone in the passenger compartment of his Upsilon-class command shuttle, he had accepted that she was gone. She didn't want him, and he didn't need her. He was better off without her. With the agony of her betrayal and finality of their broken bond, he found the comfort of darkness. The whispers of the darkness – words in his own voice that sounded decidedly too much like his fallen master – reminded him of his path. He had failed, but he hadn't strayed from his purpose. The fate of the galaxy rested on his shoulders. As with every obstacle he had overcome, this loss had to befall him for his destiny to be realized.

His destiny was within his grasp, but the war was far from over. Skywalker's stunt had made him appear weak. The Resistance would undoubtedly seek to rebuild quickly to best exploit his weaknesses, and the First Order was hesitant to accept him as their leader after his failure, but he would prove his worthiness to them all. Crait had only pushed him to become stronger, shaping him in his grandfather's image. He would destroy her. The Resistance had been in his grasp, but she had helped them all escape—in Han Solo's ship, no less. She had shut him out as if he had
wronged her; as if betraying him and leaving him for dead, after he spared her life, wasn't enough. Snoke was wrong. Killing her wouldn't complete his path to the dark side. No, he should thank her. What she did for him was far greater. If Skywalker started him on this path that fateful night, then she finished it in the throne room.

*I offered her everything, still, she betrayed me. Just like Han Solo. And Leia. Skywalker. Snoke. She was wrong. I am alone. No one can stand in my way. No one can take this away... this hatred. I will not stop until I destroy her. All of it. This is my destiny.*

The resolution was empowering. Kylo had never felt more certain of anything in his life. The more he contemplated it, the calmer he felt. This conviction was new and... satisfying. He felt, dare he believe it, no conflict. This was the closest he had come to peace in as long as he could remember. There were no voices in his head, no opposing emotions. There was only cold, powerful darkness.

Resolute nothingness.

Kylo hesitated on his course to his quarters as a sharp pain spread through his chest. It was concerning because it was not a physical pain. He sensed profound despair with a bitter aftertaste of failure – a condition he had become well acquainted with throughout his life. It was oppressive and desperate in nature, curious only in its divergence from his current contradictory resolution. His eyes narrowed as he held his breath, waiting... for what, he wasn't certain. A fleeting sensation in the Force passed through his consciousness. The source echoed with eerie, dreadful familiarity. Before he could probe into this disturbance, it disappeared, and the emptiness returned. He continued walking slowly, stubbornly determined to maintain his current emotional state, rather than analyze the possibilities of the abnormal disruption in the Force. As he focused on his emotions, his conviction returned.

"Ren!"

The peaceful feeling was short-lived. It always was. He dropped his head and sighed quietly as annoyance crept up his spine. "General Hux," he acknowledged, without turning to face him. "There are thousands of others to irritate on this ship. Find one willing to tolerate you."

"I warned you, Ren!" the general sputtered, stomping down the corridor toward him. "Luke Skywalker, the most wanted man in the Galaxy, was within our grasp! And you..."

"Skywalker is dead," Kylo sneered, his patience with the other man veil thin. He was all too aware that the edges of his emotional wounds were far more loathingly raw – exposed and fragile – than he was willing to admit. And if anyone could elicit a sharp physical reaction from him, it was his
vexing subordinate. He could not afford another embarrassment in front of the First Order; his weakness and instability were all too evident in his lapse of judgment and focus on Crait. If he did not render a strong, intimidating presence, a mutiny would strike at the first drop of blood, the first sign of vulnerability. “I have felt the change in the Force. You should be with your officers celebrating this victory,” he continued flatly. “Preferably as far away from me as physically possible.”

"Your personal interests have cost the First Order victory. The Resistance escaped. They were cornered. Defeated. Your emotions clouded your better judgment. Again! Your allegiance to the First Order is questionable at – "

“Is it?” Kylo's resolve to maintain a composed, dispassionate front lasted mere seconds. Hux was quite skilled at provoking his reactive nature. Kylo didn't bother turning to face his general, instead, he stared down at his clenched fist, reveling in the quiet choking sounds emanating from behind him.

“Careful, Hux; your assertions could be... misinterpreted as treason. I am your Supreme Leader; be mindful not to forget that.” His hand shook as he mercilessly manipulated the Force to constrict tighter around the man’s windpipe. Kylo's own breath hissed through gritted teeth as a sadistic thrill pulsed through his veins. When he felt the general's consciousness slipping away, he released him from his grasp. Kylo continued to his quarters – one hundred and thirty-five more steps – in apathetic disinterest, leaving the general in a coughing fit on the floor.

"Careful Ren," Hux whispered between gasps, staring daggers into the Supreme Leader's back as he walked away. Bracing himself on his elbows, he swallowed another cough, his ordinarily immaculately groomed hair falling loosely into his burning eyes. "Snoke is no longer here to protect you."
Chapter End Notes

Physical violence

Kylo Force-chokes Hux
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The hum of the sublight engines of the *Millennium Falcon* as it navigated hyperspace was a constant reminder of what the Resistance was escaping from. The remaining survivors celebrated their narrow victory, choosing to temporarily overlook the desolate circumstances that held them all prisoner. Escape would only ever be temporary as the First Order’s grasp twisted perpetually farther into the galaxy.

Rey sat quietly in self-imposed isolation, reanalyzing each detail of the events aboard the *Supremacy* in aching litany. The two broken halves of Luke’s lightsaber lay cold and lifeless in her trembling hands. Upon her return to the *Millennium Falcon*, Chewbacca's wise words – advice she imagined had once been uttered by her hero Han Solo – helped her focus on the dire situation on Crait. Now her friends were safe, however, and she had nothing but time to agonize over her failure in the throne room.

Snoke had created a bridge between their minds; that was her only certainty. Had he manipulated their joint visions? Had the vile creature manipulated it to draw her into a trap? Or was that a lie? Had Kylo had created it himself? Had he been manipulating her through the bond since the moment it first opened? *You’ll bring Luke Skywalker to me,* he had said in their first connection. After he realized his Force trickery wouldn’t produce the desired results, had he employed another method? Either way, she had been foolish enough to fall for it.

Rey had unwisely believed Kylo had turned when he killed Snoke. She had felt the connection between them when they fought the guard together. Her mistake was trusting him. She had begged him not to turn back to the darkness – not to turn his back on her – but he wouldn't listen, because he didn't care. She had been naïve, believing in the vision, that the light she had felt in him was enough. It was all a lie.

Kylo’s singular mission from the moment she first met him was to find Luke. The touch of his hands, the words he knew she longed to hear, the softness of his voice – it was a trap to gain access to her knowledge of the map. And by crossing the galaxy in hope of saving him, she had given him exactly what he needed. If Luke hadn’t given his life confronting his nephew to save the Resistance, then Kylo would have found him. He would never have chosen her, because she was nothing to him.

In the throne room, she had believed as he lay unconscious that her failure stemmed from not anticipating the strength of the hold the darkness had over him. His actions on Crait proved her wrong. Not only had he stood by as their ships were destroyed, but he actively chose to kill them all. If her vision had been real, he would have turned; he would have helped them end the war. He chose to double down on his evil instead.

Shutting that door – on him, their bond, and her hope in him – had been more difficult than she had ever anticipated, but it changed nothing. There was no saving him. The more the day’s events replayed in her mind, the more she felt certain of it. Even if she could turn him, she didn't want to
try anymore. The misery she felt in her failure wasn’t worth it. She had never needed anyone; she
certainly didn't need him, and the Resistance didn’t need him to win the war. Leia had said that
they had everything they needed to win, and Rey believed her because she had hope. Rey didn’t
hate him for behaving like the monster he had become. She wasn’t angry at him, but with herself
for believing him. Ben or Kylo, she had to forget him. All that mattered was that the good side
prevailed. The fate of the galaxy hung in the balance; the Resistance had to win the war.

*If we have to go through him to do it, so be it. He chose this path.*

Rey tried her best to suppress the conflict tearing her insides to shreds as she watched Leia address
the remaining survivors. The woman had survived the loss of her parents, her entire planet, her
husband and her twin brother. Her son had betrayed her in the worst imaginable way, and he was
all but lost to her. Yet Leia stayed strong; she smiled, her eyes were filled with *hope*.

Rey was in no mood to celebrate, however. While the others were distracted by reliving their
harrowing escape, she silently slipped away before the tears in her eyes would betray her. The
others were ignorant of the secrets behind those tears, and she intended to keep it that way. She
wandered the rounded halls of Han’s ship, the echoes of memories still imprinted on the walls. If
she listened hard enough, she could almost hear the ghosts of happier times. Kylo had wandered
those same steps as a young boy before he threw it all away.

*Why? Why would you turn your back on everything I have ever wanted? I saw you on the floor on
Crait. I saw the remorse in your eyes. Have you finally realized – too late – what you have done?
Or do you only regret that we escaped? Who are you, truly?*

As she rounded a corridor, she jerked to a stop as the galaxy dropped away from under her. The
peripheral sound faded away, and there was a sharp tug at the base of her neck. She felt that
stomach-churning rippling of his presence in the Force.

*No, please don't do this, she begged the universe. This was supposed to be over! You can't do this
to me again!* The Force did not answer, save for the buzzing of energy around her, like electricity
in the air. Rey stared at the floor of the corridor, noticing that it gave way to a smooth black surface
that didn’t belong on the *Millennium Falcon*. She couldn’t bring herself to meet the eyes of the
man she knew would be there; she couldn’t confirm her worst fears.

“I am Kylo Ren,” a voice said in the space between them. It sounded *nothing* like the one that had
promised she wasn’t alone. “I am the Supreme Leader. I will destroy the Jedi *and* the Resistance. I
will bring order to the galaxy.”
Reluctantly, Rey raised her eyes from the floor.
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Kylo stormed into his quarters, tossing his cape across the room. Red salt still clung to the underside of the fabric where he had dropped it, a tangible reminder of defeat. He wished the dust was permanent, to remind himself of his past failures whenever he wore it. The scars would do.

Rey had bested him on Starkiller; Luke had on Crait – both wielding his emotional weaknesses against him. Never again. His rage would suffocate every last emotion inside him until there was nothing left; the darkness would free him.
Kylo stopped short at the foot of his bed. There were nondescript boxes piled neatly on the floor. Removing a top, he recognized the items as personal belongings he had with him aboard the *Supremacy*. The droids had been quick to gather them from the wreckage and deliver them to his chambers, the only proof that he had not dreamed it all. His mind had been so fixated on the events on Crait, he had forgotten that the *Supremacy* had been damaged.

He hadn't thought to question why he was back aboard the *Finalizer*. It was almost as if he hadn't killed Snoke, as if his master was merely on the *Supremacy*, waiting to train the weaknesses out of him. He had known Snoke was gone, of course. There was no denying the freedom he felt at becoming the only voice in his own head, but in that moment, reality finally sank its teeth deep into his flesh. A chill shuddered down his spine.

Snoke was *dead*. Forever. He was not aboard the *Supremacy*, waiting for Kylo. He would not hold his once-apprentice accountable for his failures again. Kylo was the master now. He was the Supreme Leader of the First Order. This kingdom was his... and his alone. Darkness swirled through him at the thought of the insurmountable power. A weight lifted off his chest. Forget Rey, the bond, Luke, his mother, the Resistance – he finally had everything he had ever wanted. He had done it; this was real. The boxes before him proved that.

Striding to the boxes against the far wall, he opened the lid to discover that the droids had left him Snoke's belongings as well. Scrolls, ancient texts, a holoprojector, a ring, and... and Kylo's broken helmet. *He kept it?* A sickening disgust rolled through him at the sight of it.

*You're just a child in a mask,* his fallen master had said, knowing how profoundly it would wound him, how weak it would make him. It was with those words that he had realized that *he* was Snoke's rabid cur.

“*I'll show them a child in a mask,*” he promised to the empty room. “*Just as I showed him.*”

The helmet had crumpled under the force of his blows, twisted and split into pieces. Now, without the bond, he was stronger. Unstoppable. He would make this mask stronger too. As broken as he had once been, it would show the galaxy exactly who he was now. The mask would also grant him an escape from the shadow of legends. Once the Resistance was gone, his identity would be unknown. Ben Solo would be dead. Kylo Ren would be the ruler the galaxy remembered, his actions speaking louder in his anonymity. He was anyone... and no one... exactly what the galaxy needed—exactly what he had always wanted to be.

Kylo didn't need *this* helmet, of course. He could have another one created from the finest materials in the galaxy. But this one... rebuilding this one would show the Resistance that Kylo
Ren had been tempted by the light of a nothing scavenger, but he had been made stronger. The helmet would show her that she had failed to turn him… or destroy him. He had been a fool, believing…

*It doesn't matter anymore,* he reminded himself. What mattered was that she had betrayed him, and he had finally found his place in the darkness. Now he was greater than even his master had imagined. He would show them all the monster that they had created, and this time he would destroy them all.

Kylo brought the mask into the receiving hall of his antechambers. A black, stone throne commanded the center of the vast room. It was simple in its design compared to the ornate ostentatiousness of the one located in Snoke's throne room on the *Supremacy*, but it served its purpose. Before he died, Snoke had used the room to keep his apprentice under his thumb from across the galaxy. It was a constant reminder that he was never too far out of reach. Kylo had been required to attend to his master's projection in that receiving hall whenever Snoke deigned to appear. During the periods of punishment for a weakness, Snoke had often been the only contact he had for days or weeks.

His failure on Starkiller had prompted a more severe punishment, earning him a stay on the *Supremacy* instead, but it was the same method. Locked away in his chambers, his Knights purposely sent away on missions across the galaxy, he had been isolated from everyone. That was how Rey had the opportunity to tempt him in the first place, though he supposed that had been his master's intention all along.

Kylo climbed the dais and released a slow exhale as he stared at the throne. *It's mine.* His fingers trailed over the smooth surface; the stone was cold under his touch. Steeling his nerves, he lowered himself with a tentative stiffness onto the throne he had sacrificed *everything* to possess.

He sat rigidly, waiting. For what? He wasn't sure. A change, perhaps? An electric sensation in the Force? Something open, honest, and true that left him feeling as if he were exactly where he was meant to be, as he had felt in that hut when he touched... it didn't matter when he had felt it before. He craved to feel it again, in *this* place, where he knew he was destined to be. This was *everything* he believed he had ever wanted.

Only, he didn’t feel what he had expected. He was Supreme Leader. This was *his* throne. Yet, it felt wrong. It was like shoving a circular object into a square hole. Certainly, it fit, but there was an emptiness, a glaring incompatibility that could not be ignored.

*What is wrong with me?*
Shoving those thoughts away, he turned the broken pieces of the helmet over in his hand. It was barely recognizable; the metal had been twisted and crushed under the wrath of his profound rage. Still, it wasn't as damaged as his past. At least this was repairable.

Kylo manipulated the Force to unbend the metal first, working to smooth the gouges and depressions as best he could with the energy at his disposal. Then he ignited his lightsaber to haphazardly fuse the pieces back together, one fragment at a time. The plasma liquified the metal along the cracks, forming a fortified bond where the pieces fit together. Where the fractures had once shown weakness, the welds reinforced the mask, making it stronger than it had ever been before. The helmet itself was even more deformed; the edges binding the pieces were jagged and raised, the clean arcs of the silver embellishments were splintered and asymmetrical – unbalanced.

Kylo didn't care; the helmet had seen its fair share of damage in combat, and its battered resilience reflected his own. More importantly, it did nothing to detract from its anonymity or intimidating appearance. He was a creature of darkness after all. Kylo placed the helmet over his head, pressing the hinged mechanism to secure it. The servomotors sparked, creating small plumes of smoke from the damage he had wrought upon it. The voice modulator crackled and hissed as he spoke into it.

“I am Kylo Ren. I am the Supreme Leader. I will destroy the Jedi and the Resistance. I will bring order to the galaxy.”

A tingle of energy down his spine was his only warning before he heard a sharp gasp. His head snapped up to see her standing before his throne. Every muscle was paralyzed in shock. He blinked, as if she would disappear when he reopened his eyes, but she still stood before him in all her ferocity. His mind stalled, as it had the first time their bond had opened.

It's impossible... the bond was severed...

Time was frozen. Neither moved, nor broke their fierce stare. The only sound in the room was the echo of their heavy breaths – hers, shallow and quick, and his, hissing through the malfunctioning voice modulator of his crudely repaired helmet. He wouldn't be the first one to break and show weakness by giving voice to the thoughts in his mind. The air was heavy enough with their warring emotions that words were unnecessary; none were consequential enough to be spoken at that moment anyway.

After her initial shock faded, Rey's eyes narrowed, and she held his stare defiantly. It was as if their connection on Crait had resumed where it left off, but he would not yearn for answers to her betrayal as he had done then. He'd had time to step back and see the situation clearly – to see her for the liar, manipulator, and traitor that she was. He was a fool for trusting her and believing that she was different than anyone else he let in.
She had been convincing; he’d give her that. The most convincing one yet. Regardless, she had helped him in the long run, she had killed the last bit of light inside him. The darkness had hardened his weak, pathetic heart. He didn’t care anymore; he was better off alone. She was as good as dead to him. Judging by the fire in her eyes, the feeling was mutual.

Her entire body was tense, apoplectic, and he did not doubt that if she had access to a weapon, she would have chanced a futile attempt at firing at him again. Perhaps she would be more creative this time. She did have his lightsaber. From the very first time they met, she had never feared him, but he would change that. Her fearlessness was something he had once admired about her, but now he recognized it as the path to her downfall. After her betrayal, he saw through her lies, knew the true reason she didn't fear him; it was not her belief in her own strength, but her mistaken confidence in his weakness, his “conflict.”

Kylo would show them all the consequences of underestimating him. He would finish what his grandfather started. Nothing... nothing would stand in his way, especially not the aspiring Jedi standing in his path rather than by his side, currently staring boldly into the visor of his mask. She couldn't see the resolution in his eyes. He found both irritation and relief in that.

Kylo Ren.

The fear found him easily in the darkness. Her words... were in his thoughts. Kylo was quite familiar with voices in his head, but not hers. There was no mistaking it, however, the voice he heard was Rey's, he was certain of it. The bond – not only is it not broken, he realized; it's stronger. She hadn't shut out the bond, only closed the connection. Even if Snoke had created it, it superseded his death, therefore it had become the will of the Force. Kylo didn't know much about Force bonds, but he knew enough about the will of the Force to understand the significance of their connection, and the implications of its escalation.

With a jolt, she was gone, safe somewhere across the galaxy. She was never actually in the room with him, of course, but that was her choice. In denying him, she had fled back to them. He recognized exactly what ship she was still aboard, knowing the corridor she was standing in better than anyone. Desperate for air, he ripped off his helmet. Relief flooded his veins that their bond was still intact, but with its return came the ache in his chest that he had felt on Crait.

He tamped that down quickly, channeling the anger from her betrayal. I hate this bond, he reminded himself. I hate her. I will destroy her.

Had he not called that lightsaber when she ripped it away from him, she would have succeeded in killing him. She should have finished it when she awoke first, because he wouldn’t hesitate to kill
her. The ache in his chest – it meant nothing. He would use it to become stronger. And the relief he felt at the return of the bond, that was only due to the gift the Force had presented him. She had used him to save the Resistance, now he would use her and their cursed bond to find them and destroy them all.

The split second before the darkness found him in his anger, he swore he could hear the gravelly chuckle of a man he hoped he would never hear again, taunting him with another proclamation of, *amazing, every word of what you just said was wrong.*

Kylo jumped to his feet, holding his breath in all-consuming fear. His eyes darted around the room, searching for another apparition. The room, the Force, his mind... was quiet. Shaking his head, he tried to convince himself it was a fearful hallucination. *It's not real. It's impossible. He's dead. I felt it.* Still, he found himself struggling to swallow. He couldn't shake the trepidation tightening in his throat.

*See you around, kid,* echoed tauntingly in his memory.
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The moment the connection closed, the tears began to fall. Rey had cried when she left the Supremacy, certainly. The wait in the escape shuttle for Chewbacca and the Millennium Falcon were the loneliest moments she had felt since she left Jakku. She had sobbed in fear for her friends who were losing their lives and for the man she had left unconscious on the floor of a broken ship.

That was before Crait, when Kylo revealed how evil he could be. Though it had been difficult to hate him in that last connection on that base, with his sorrowful eyes staring back at her, everything else had been lost in the urgency. It had been easier then – when her friends were in immediate danger – to push aside what had happened between them. She had never considered how painful it would be to see him again without that distraction. She most certainly had not considered seeing him again so soon.
Emotions she had successfully buried since she had left the Supremacy suddenly overwhelmed her the moment she saw his face—no, not face—mask. Not just any mask, but the mask she hadn’t seen him wear since the skyway when he killed his father on Starkiller. The longer he had gone without it, the more he seemed to transform back into Ben Solo. After all that transpired in the hut, she had every reason to have hope that he would turn. He had understood her, promised she would never be alone. She had been so certain he would turn.

The mask had left her with little doubt that he was any closer to Ben Solo now than when she first met him on Takodana, perhaps even further down the path of darkness. As painful as it had been to see him again, the mask made it easier to hate him. It made it easier to pretend it was only her enemy, Kylo Ren, not the short glimpse of the man she had thought was Ben Solo. Rey dreaded the day she would have to meet his burning stare again.

Kylo may have been lost to darkness, but she knew that whatever had happened to them on Ahch-To wasn’t over. It changed nothing. She had to let him go, so she could save the galaxy from his wrath. She had to let him go. If she ignored him long enough, perhaps whatever it was between them would fade. That meant she would have to ignore the aching pain that was tearing at her heart, making it difficult to breathe. It was worse now—the loneliness—but she would survive. She was good at it.

Rey was wandering aimlessly when she stumbled upon the cot containing the unconscious woman she had only glimpsed briefly after escaping Crait. Rey didn’t even know her name, how she had come to the Resistance, or why she was unconscious. The only thing that mattered was there was hope; she was alive. Finn had spent most of his time checking on her or sitting with her. She was clearly important to him.

Anyone important to him was important to Rey. Straightening the blanket over the woman, as she had watched Finn do, Rey wondered if moments like that were what having a family was like. She imagined that was how parents comforted their children when they were sick or had nightmares. She wondered if this young woman had parents, if they were missing her, or if she was missing them. She wondered who the woman was. Could she find family in her too?

Rey was so singularly focused on the unconscious woman that she hadn’t heard or felt anyone approach. “Her name is Rose,” the familiar, comforting voice said.

She dried her tears before turning around to face her friend. “Hey, Finn, I didn’t see you.”

“You okay?” he asked, wrapping her in a tight embrace. Finn gave the best hugs. It was everything she imagined she would feel if she’d had a family. It was soothing, centering, and warm, like the
first meal in days. She released a long, slow exhale, and the tension drained from her body.

She smiled.

“I will be, I think. You?”

He released her from his embrace, but his arm remained around her back in support as he turned to stare down at Rose. “I will be when she wakes up, when I know you’re both safe.”

Rey studied the concern on his face before turning back to the woman. She knew that fear well; being across the galaxy from her friend when he was injured, without word from the Resistance about his condition, had been excruciating. Her apprehension hadn’t eased until she had found him alive and well on Crait. “What happened to her?”

Finn reached forward to straighten the perfectly arranged blanket. “She crashed her speeder into my speeder. It was my fault. She stopped me from flying my speeder into a battering-ram cannon on Crait. She saved my life.” Rey couldn’t hide her gasp as she turned to stare at him in disbelief. The news had blindsided her, viscerally terrified her; goosebumps crawled over her skin, and bile rose in her throat. Finn, her friend, – more than a friend, family – had almost... sacrificed himself. She was proud of him for finding his place in the Resistance, but she had almost lost the most important person in her life. He was her rock in this terrifying new place. What would she have done without him?

Rey turned back toward Rose, viewing the woman in a new light. Not only did she want the woman to live for her friend’s sake, but hers as well. She owed this stranger everything; she had saved her only family. “Then I am forever in her debt,” she said softly. “I can’t do this without you, my friend.”

Rey hugged him again, tighter, as if she could squeeze him strongly enough to erase the visions of losing him from her mind. On Ahch-To, she had been so concerned about him healing from what Kylo had done that she hadn’t thought about how it might have changed him. She could feel it now – how he had changed. He was braver and had found a purpose and belonging, but he was still the kind, caring man she had met on Jakku. “I’m sorry, I didn’t tell you until now,” he whispered.

“No, thank you for being honest with me,” she replied. It didn’t make her feel any better. Finn was nothing but honest with her, and she was hiding a secret that would break his heart. Kylo had almost killed him, and she had gone to him on the Supremacy. Tell him you’ll explain later, Chewie had suggested when she had tried to decide what to tell her best friend before putting her life in the hands of their enemy. But she couldn’t explain. Not only had she gone to the man
who had tried to kill them all, she had failed, putting them all at risk, and Finn had nearly sacrificed himself because of it. Even worse, the danger hadn’t passed. Rey was still connected to their enemy.

Finn stepped out of her arms, grasping her shoulders tightly. “Rey, I need to tell you something else.”

“What’s wrong?” Rey studied his eyes for a clue, fearful of what she would find. His tone had sounded apprehensive. Whatever it was, it wasn’t good. After her confrontation with Kylo, she wasn’t certain how much more she could manage. What if something terrible had happened? What if they didn’t want her at the Resistance? What if they knew?

He exhaled slowly. “It’s just, you and Rose are both important to me, and I hope you can –“

“Anyone important to you, is important to me, Finn,” she said, hoping that was all it was. Perhaps Finn believed she would think Rose was replacing her as his friend. There couldn’t be anything further from the truth. She didn’t know Rose, but she trusted Finn. They could expand their family with more friends, it wasn’t a competition. There was nothing that could come between them.

Finn smiled, visibly relaxing.

“Good, good. I have a lot to tell you.”

*I have so much to tell you too,* she wanted to tell him. She couldn’t do it; she wasn’t strong enough, yet. One day, one day soon, he would know. “And I have all the time in the galaxy now,” she said instead.

Finn grabbed her hand, dragging her away from Rose. Rey happily allowed him to guide her to a nearby game table. Sitting down across from him, she was reminded of their trip from Jakku to Takodana. So much had changed, *too* much. Finn activated a switch on the table and holographic creatures popped up on the board. Finn was excited in a way that made her giggle. It didn’t require much to make him happy and Rey loved that about him. “I missed you,” he said, as he began a new game, “after everything that’s happened.”

“You have no idea,” she replied.
Rey smiled as Chewbacca passed by with a friendly growl on his way back to the cockpit. “Where are we going?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “Far from here, I guess.”

*I don’t care, as long as it’s as far from the First Order as possible.*

*As far from him as possible.*
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"General Hux!"

The general's face appeared from the holovid projector. He cleared his throat nervously as he waited for Kylo to issue his command.

"Yes...Supreme Leader."

"Have your troops had success locating the Resistance?" Kylo knew he shouldn’t attempt to undermine the general. He knew he needed him as an ally, but he more desperately needed a distraction. The reemergence of the bond had created a nagging curiosity in the back of his mind,
"We believe they have fled to a planet on the outer rim. They are of little consequence now. Our flotillas have seized control over more systems as we speak. My army will..."

"Your army?"

"Your army of traitors and incompetent slaves?" Kylo sneered through gritted teeth. His disdain was evident, as was his general's. He knew it was a sore point of contention between them, but he continued to prod it.

“I will have you know, my father...” Hux began, but Kylo promptly interrupted him.

“Your father recruited the top of the class at the academy on Arkanis. They were strong, capable and loyal, as much as men of free will can be. But what you have done... you have enslaved children. You have indoctrinated them with propaganda, but that does not make them an impermeable unit. You are more foolish than I had previously assumed if you believe that servility prevents betrayal. We need to begin developments of a clone army; a clone army would be more efficient.”

Kylo suppressed a smirk as Hux's face pinched in contempt. “You are impossible to underestimate, Ren.”

“And you’re wasting my oxygen, General.”

“Open a holobook for once and read imperial history, before presenting your illogical desires for another clone army as some homage to your grandfather,” Hux spat. “The clone armies failed due to their genetic weakness. Biological weapons can easily destroy an army that shares the same DNA.”

Kylo’s anger seethed. He knew he was losing control over his volatile emotions and would likely regret it later, but he wouldn't stand for Hux's insubordination. “You want a historical holobook? Which one?” he began summoning thin, crystalline boards from an archive shelf in his quarters. “Pre-Republic Era?” The cerulean glowing holobook crashed into the wall, shattering as he threw it at Hux’s image. “Expansionist Era? Great Manifest Period?” He shoved them at the projection with aggressive force. The general sighed. “No? Indecta Era? Kymoodon Era? Pius Dea Era?

Irritation fractured through Hux’s haughty and calm facial expression. “Old Sith Wars? Inter Sith Wars? Draggulch period? Fall of the Republic era? Ah, here is your favorite: Imperial period,” Kylo mused, examining them for a moment, before throwing them at the projection as well. “Or what about this one, Hux? This one is a bit more specific. The Clone Wars. Years 22 to 19 BBY. Why don’t you take a look at that!” The general rolled his eyes at the shattering sound of more destruction at the hands of the Supreme Leader. “If you had bothered to read any of them, you would know that there have always been armies, because there have always been wars. There will always be wars! Enslavement and indoctrination of armies is no new concept, Hux; let there be no mistake about that. I would rather have an army whose sole weakness is a genetic susceptibility to biological weapons than an army with the weakness of potentially overthrowing the very leadership that commands it. An infallible army is what the First Order needs…”

As the rage simmered, Kylo remembered himself. He straightened, tempering his breathing.

"I know what the First Order needs... Supreme Leader," Hux growled.

Kylo slowly paced the floor, his hands behind his back, restraining himself from lashing out at the general again. He knew he had to maintain the upper hand with Hux, so he struggled to regain control. "Then you agree that the First Order and the civilizations we rule over require stability to progress. The army is the First Order's fist, used to crush anarchy. We need a strong hand of law. Clones obey the commands of the law. They are impartial. They ensure order. Anarchy, created by traitors like FN-2187, breeds disorder. If we wanted disorder, we could have remained under the stagnant, unstable, weak Republic. They were easily overtaken by their enemies because they could not maintain law. Without order and stability, you have no law. Your army is an infection on the underbelly of the First Order. Treason and mutiny breed in their ranks. That is not what the First Order needs."

The general was silent, his face reddened in anger. He swallowed his immediate reaction. "My army has its grasp in every star system in the galaxy. We will find them. And don't underestimate me, Ren. I have taken precautionary measures to protect the First Order from mutiny and betrayal."

"Ah, and what are those, Hux?"

"I will not bore you with the intricacies of forming an impermeable military unit, Ren, as you know little of how a dominant military is actually operated. Though I will have you know, I have taken great care to install certain redundancies. A mutiny inside my destroyer is impossible. The stormtroopers cannot access any of our systems. I have security cams everywhere. Someone is always watching your every move.” His tone insinuated that his statement was a warning...or a
threat directed at Kylo.

*Perhaps I should create my own redundancies.*

“The possibility of a mutiny from another ship has also been eliminated. The *Finalizer* has master control over the computer systems of our *entire* fleet. If one of our destroyers attempts to commit mutiny, I can lower their shields and disable their internal weapons and defense systems. They would be defenseless against our counterattack. Do not underestimate me, Ren. I cannot be betrayed!”

*Careful, Hux, those were Snoke's last words before I cut him in half.*

“And my army is everything that a clone army could not be. We have outgrown the capabilities of the Empire. Their clone army was outdated and weak. My army will fight for our cause because they believe in it. They will search every star system until that ship is found; I promise you that, and then they will destroy them all, because they are the real power behind the First Order!” Kylo was pleased that they were not having this conversation in person, as he was positive spit was flying out of the other man's mouth in his frenzied state. *Ignorant fool.* He chose to drop the subject with him; the general was too blinded by pride in the army he created to appreciate their weaknesses. Having lost interest in arguing with his subordinate, Kylo extended an overture of truce.

"There is an easier way,” he said. “You can track them, General."

"Ren – Supreme Leader – We do not have the capability of tracking them through hyperspace! In the aftermath of Crait, we were unable to track their trajectory, and their ship does not have –" Kylo’s composure had been worn down by his condescending tone. *Who do you think you're talking to!* He slammed his hand on his desk, the Kriin-wood fracturing under his palm from the Force released.

"We do not *need* your technology, General! They escaped on the Mil... on a Corellian YT 1300F Light Freighter...Han Solo's ship. The Girodyne SRB42 sublight engines were modified, yielding multiple transponder codes. That makes it almost impossible to identify and track."

The general was quick to interrupt. “Exactly, which is why –”

“Unless,” Kylo said, staring at his subordinate conspiratorially as he walked around his desk,
“you’ve worked on that piece of garbage, and you can recite every single one of those codes by memory.”

Hux grinned in understanding.
Mild violence.

Kylo is, well, Kylo and throws some things at Hux's projection.
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Rey hadn’t consciously decided to isolate herself from her friends, but as she wandered the corridors, she was drawn to the comfort of the few empty spaces left aboard. It was odd – this dichotomy that Rey suffered. There was no privacy, no seclusion, no place of her own to think. Being in close quarters with so many different energies crowding the Force around her was new and exhausting. No matter where she went on the ship, there was someone else there, too. It was suffocating how trapped and overwhelmed she felt by the constant presence of others.

And yet, she felt achingly alone. The burdens she carried were heavy, but no one could ease them with acceptance. No one would understand – no one in the Resistance, at any rate. Those dangerous thoughts that she couldn’t share were proof of how alone she truly was. This cursed perdition of torment had no end in sight. She finally found solace in a vacant turret and curled up in a corner, watching the open space flash past through the viewports.
They will never understand me. How can I ever explain what happened? How can I explain that I went there to try to turn our enemy? How can I explain that he saved me, but I still failed? How do I explain to them that we’re connected? How do I explain this when I don’t understand it myself? They will think of me as a fool. A traitor. They will never trust me. This is a path I have to walk alone.

Closing her eyes, she could almost feel the dark, cold stream of overwhelming hatred surrounding him like a Force field. She could almost see him, stalking down a dark corridor. A calm but determined expression had settled on his features. His eyes, the windows to his ever-evolving emotions, were empty pools of darkness. Devoid of humanity. Evil.

It shook her to the core. Malice suffocated her, squeezing the breath from her lungs as it constricted her chest. She gasped as she struggled under the gravity of it. Darkness like venom pierced her heart, streaming steadily through her, devouring the light. These emotions were raw, sharp, and all-consuming. The most terrifying realization was that they did not belong to her. She didn’t know how, but she knew this was him. She could feel his hatred. Instead of pushing it away, she let it in, finding the darkness to hate him in return. There was a dark chuckle as she did, and that snapped her from her thoughts.

Her eyes opened to the familiar sight of the ventral turret on the Falcon. She felt like a cloud had passed in front of the sun, and, as quickly as it had appeared, it was gone. Her senses returned. The electric frequency of the Force, his frequency, was gone.

As she had spent countless hours before, she distracted herself by trying to reattach the two halves of her broken lightsaber. She released the broken crystals from the internal mechanism and rolled them over in her fingers dejectedly. A warm feeling radiated through her body as she caught a blue glow in the corner of her vision. She turned to see smiling, peaceful Luke, bathed in blue light.

"Luke?"

He chuckled. "I thought you might need a little more guidance."

She held out the two halves of his broken lightsaber to him. “Kylo and I did this,” she whispered. “I thought I could save him. I thought I could bring him back to the light. But all I caused was more destruction.”

“In my defense, I told you it wouldn’t turn out the way you hoped.” His voice was light and peaceful, a tone she had never heard from him before. As grateful as she was to see him, there was still a part of her that was still disappointed in him. He should have been there to teach her and guide her through this connection to her enemy. He should have taken his lightsaber and come back with her. She needed him now more than ever.

“I know you died with peace and purpose, but why?” she demanded, her anger was simmering just below the surface. “Why didn’t you help the Resistance escape? Why did you have to face him?

“I think you did just fine,” he said. There was a softness in his eyes she had never seen before. “Ben needed me more. He needed to face me.” It didn’t escape her that he still referred to his nephew by his given name. “It was only intended to give you time to help them. I knew I couldn’t save him, and I wasn’t foolish enough to believe I could turn him, but he needed to release the resentment he’s been carrying with him without the weight of taking my life on his conscience. That’s why I projected myself as I had looked that night. Only, I might have projected myself with my father’s lightsaber instead of mine.” He shrugged, chuckling to himself.

“But the last time he saw it I had it, so he must have thought…”

Luke continued, unaffected. “He needed to understand that he aligned himself with the wrong side. The Emporer… Supreme Leader – whatever he was – is dead. Nothing Ben wants is there. He needed to see that.”

Rey had thought she had known what he wanted, but she had been wrong. “When I went to him on the Supremacy, I tried to save him… you were right. It didn’t go the way I hoped. I failed. He’s gone.”

“I’ll tell you what I told my sister on that base,” he said, blue eyes kind and sympathetic. “No one’s ever really gone. I’m proof of that. But the most important lesson I ever learned was that failure is our greatest teacher. Look around you, Rey. Everyone failed. It is what you do in the wake of failure that is important. And besides, kid, it wasn’t up to you to save him.”

The anger only escalated as she thought of all of the ways she let him down, "But you were right. I should have listened. I was so sure of everything. But he chose power. And now it’s just getting worse. I’m so sorry."

Luke was watching her more closely, as if he could feel her anger and it concerned him. "No, I
should have told you the truth from the beginning. I should have done a lot of things from the beginning, like confront you on your lies.”

“I didn’t –”

Luke raised his eyebrows, glaring at her knowingly. “Blasters don’t go off from cleaning them.”

“Oh.” Rey lowered her eyes, fidgeting with the hem of her gray tunic. Her only concern at the time was convincing him to go back to the Resistance with her. She had feared that the strange Force connection with his nephew would interfere with that. She had no idea it would become a permanent source of suffering. Most importantly, she hadn’t kept the secret for nefarious reasons; she only hoped Luke understood that.

“I’m not blameless, either,” he said, interrupting her thoughts. “I shouldn’t have allowed you to believe the island was under attack. It wasn’t about you, Rey; I was so consumed by my own failures that I let my emotions cloud my judgment. I hadn’t seen my nephew since he collapsed his hut on us, so when I saw him in that hut, with you… I reacted poorly. All I could see was how dangerous this Force bond was for you, but I reacted in anger rather than helping you through this.”

"Force bond?"

"Yes, your… energies in the Force are bonded together. It’s why you could see him, touch him, like he was in the room with you,” he explained, but the softness in his eyes had disappeared. There was something he was searching for in her stare. “You are both extremely Force-sensitive, and somehow that bond was created through the Force. I had a bond with my sister and my father, but not even those were as strong as what is developing between you two. I have never seen or read of anything like this, especially between two equals on opposite sides of the Force,"

Her voice was urgent, pleading. “Can I break this bond? Can you?”

“Do you want to, Rey?” Her anger flared. Of course, I do? Or do you still believe I have too much darkness in me? He paused to study her, his piercing blue eyes bore through her defenses to read her like a book. It reminded her of… a man that was dead to her more than the ghost before her. She supposed the proficiency in analyzing people was a Skywalker trait. Whatever he saw there, it didn’t seem favorable for a clean break. After a moment, he continued, “I have never heard of breaking a bond, it would take a strength more powerful than the Force itself. You can shut yourself off from it permanently, but it would require shutting yourself off from the Force. You could ignore him or block your mind from his. Maybe it would close the bond temporarily, but he would still be there. The only way to end it for good is death, but even if you survive it, there will
always be a wound where his energy had been." The blue aura danced around him as he spoke, and, as consequential as his words were, part of her was relieved to have an answer to something. There were so many unanswered questions that she feared would never be explained, because the only person left to ask was her mortal enemy.

"But this has to end!" she cried. "I should have said something sooner; maybe you could have helped me stop it. I was just so scared. And something in me was curious. I wanted to understand him because he understood me. Or, at least, I thought he did. But everything was a lie. Snoke said he created it. It should have ended with his death, but the bond is getting stronger, Luke. It started with only seeing him. But then today, I saw his surroundings, I heard his thoughts, felt his feelings. I saw him without seeing him. What is this?"

"Interesting..." Luke replied. He sat quietly for a few moments, deep in thought. She didn't know if he was unsure what to tell her or was just as confused as she was, but she sat next to him until he spoke again.

"If he or Snoke isn’t controlling it, it seems that the bond is growing stronger as you both interact. I would not try to use this to your advantage, Rey. This is playing with fire. My only advice is to resist it. I am concerned about how strong – and dangerous – this bond could become for you. Snoke may have intensified this bond, but a Force bond is created by the Force. I think we must question why the Force connected you two in the first place. I wish I had more answers for you, but the ways of the Force are just as mysterious to me as anyone else.”

“Please, you’re the only one I can look to for answers. There must be something you can tell me,” she begged.

“I can try to help you gain answers while I’m here with you. It would be too dangerous to do alone. Close your eyes and reach out with your feelings," he told her, placing his hand over hers as he guided her through the Force. She could not feel his touch as she had on Ahch-To, but she could sense his energy. "Think of him, think of this Force bond you share. What do you see?"

Rey closed her eyes and opened herself up to the Force around her. Luke guided her deeper, and she could feel the objects around her, as if they were alive. She could feel Luke's bright blue aura, and she could sense Leia in another part of the ship. She could feel everything in the universe all at once. She thought of Kylo. She thought of the moment their fingers touched.

*Where are you?*

She was catapulted through the stars, following a glowing, moving band of coils stretching across
the galaxy. Living tendrils branched out from the band like a spiraling infestation of light. It ended in a dark, thick, storming shadow of evolving viscosity. She reached out and touched this shadow ever so gently and instantly recognized his familiar Force signature. The shadow sent black, sticky webs snaking around her fingers like thin, slimy serpents. She ripped her hand away, but the black remnants disappeared inside her. She sensed from this touch that the shadow was the hurricane of emotions, thoughts, and memories that she knew as Ben Solo… or Kylo Ren. She did not know how, but somehow, she knew that if she followed the glowing band into this shadow, she would have access to everything.

What would I see? How could I use it to my advantage, to the advantage of the Resistance? What if he caught me? Could he do the same to me? Luke is right; whatever this is, it feels dangerous. I don’t want to go in there. I don’t want to see him.

Backing away, Rey followed her glowing band back through the stars. She shook feverishly as she entered her own consciousness again. As she opened her eyes, she was aware of the same presence she had just touched. A shadow. That dark, viscous cloud she had felt was no longer across the galaxy, it was lingering in the back of her mind. She could feel their bond now.

Can he feel me? Will this go away?

"Luke, I saw him. I found him. And now I can feel his energy as if he is a part of me. What does this all mean?" She asked Luke, desperate for more answers. When she turned to him, however, she found an empty turret.

Even though I know you're with me, Luke, why do I feel...so alone?
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Kylo sat on the edge of his bed, his broad shoulders slumped, his head in his hands. The more he thought about the brief variation in the Force, as fleeting as it was, the more it intrigued him. The pain in his chest was not his own. That torment... What was it? How could he feel it? It didn't make sense. This was no longer just a bridge across the galaxy, which was intriguing enough.

_I felt her. I know it._

The voices in his head were quiet. For the first time since he could remember, there was silence on the other end. At first, it was a relief. He had control over his own thoughts. He was his own master. But in this a moment of uncertainty, when he was clearly over his head, he had no one to look to for guidance. He felt utterly and completely alone.

Snoke had told him that the bond was _his_ creation. It was the greatest betrayal of his life, worse than what Luke, his family, or his so-called ‘brother’ had done. He forced the thoughts away before he allowed those memories to consume him again. Perhaps it wasn’t the worst betrayal; perhaps that title belonged to _the last Jedi_, but that would require he acknowledge that she meant anything to him in the first place, which would only cause painful emotions to resurface again.

It didn’t matter. The point was if Snoke created the bond, it should have died with him. It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that what he thought he saw… and heard… and felt was the result of sleep-deprivation-induced hallucinations. It would explain why he had thought he heard his uncle. But the part inside him he couldn’t silence with denial – the Force-sensitive part – knew this was something else.

As he searched his memories of training for answers, a tingling feeling crept into thoughts. His body went rigid in full alert. His head snapped up as his eyes searched the room for the cause. He tried to steady his breathing, but all he could hear was the vigorous staccato of his own heartbeat. The Force rippled. There was no mistaking it this time, he could sense _her_.

It was not her physical presence in the room, as before, but her presence in the Force...in his mind. He felt her press into his consciousness. Kylo focused intently, creating a barrier inside his mind against her search. If she succeeded in penetrating it, she would have access to everything; his thoughts, his emotions, his memories. He shuddered. The thought of his very soul in the hands of the enemy left him terrified. Such an intimate vulnerability was his worst nightmare. He refused to imagine the consequences if he failed to keep her out. Despair... confusion... curiosity... trepidation... loneliness flowed through him. Though he knew these were the same emotions in his own heart, he also knew these emotions were not his own.
This is impossible... How is she doing this? She can’t possibly be doing this on her own. What does she want? What is she looking for?

The more he thought of her, the more he could almost see her in his mind’s eye, sitting in the ventral turret on that ship. He could see her. Somehow...this was real. His blood boiled beneath his skin, burning feverishly through his veins as he understood what was happening in front of him. The energy of Luke Skywalker sat next to her, his hand over hers guiding her through the Force...guiding her to him.

Luke was helping her use their connection to her advantage, he was certain of it. Which meant Luke had chosen her over his own nephew, again. Kylo had feared that Luke’s energy would haunt him like the many ghosts in his nightmares, but this was somehow worse. His uncle would not ‘always be with him’ as he had convinced him on Crait; he already had his perfect student. Even in death, Luke still believed he wasn't worth it. Instead, he had poisoned her mind to believe in the myth of a possibility of a new Jedi Order, as he'd tried to do with Kylo. It was unfortunate Luke was dead; he could have solved Kylo's problem for him when he invariably discovered she had darkness in her, too. But that would be too easy.

Kylo understood the truth; he had only ever been a mission to her. That was why they had sent her in search of his uncle. Luke poisoned her mind against him and sent her to him to seduce him from the dark side. Unfortunately for her, Kylo saw through it all when she immediately begged him to save the others. Foolishly, Kylo had pleaded with her to stay, but he knew as he said that last desperate word that she would betray him. She had failed then, but so had he when he had attempted to show her what he did to those who betrayed him. This time he would show no mercy, but, evidently, neither would she.

With Luke's help, she sought to use the bond against him, undoubtedly in an attempt to gain information to help the Resistance. If Luke believed helping her would break Kylo's will, he would prove him wrong. His will would not be undone. He would destroy the Jedi Order and the Resistance. He would destroy it all. If that meant destroying himself in the process, then so be it.

You should have killed me when you had the chance, Skywalker.

The blue apparition opened his eyes and turned his head in Kylo's direction. Kylo tensed to minimize the shudder of fear that passed through him as their eyes met. The older man's face looked grave.

Can you see me, Luke? What do you see when you look upon the monster you created?
In an instant, Luke disappeared, and the nudging sensation in his mind was gone. He blinked, and he could no longer see the turret. The sound and energy in the room returned to normal. He was alone again. Only, he wasn’t. Her presence may have disappeared, but now he could feel her presence, their bond, lingering in the back of his mind. He was left with an echo through his thoughts.

Where are you?

He held his breath, waiting for more to happen. His muscles twitched in anticipation, prepared to defend himself against the attack he was convinced would come. The minutes ticked by, but nothing more happened. Her presence in his mind did not fade. It was the bond – he was certain of it. Just as her pushing into his mind during the interrogation had opened this, and whatever she had just done had intensified it. If he pushed through the energy he sensed in his mind, he knew he would find her consciousness. If her light didn’t terrify him, he would have.

Kylo was left with a terrifying – and an irritatingly comforting – awareness; this bond could not have been Snoke, or at least not solely Snoke. His body had long since cooled, but the bond only grew stronger. Kylo had assumed the bond was fading after his death. He believed she had severed it on Crait when she had shut him out, but it was clear now the bond was as strong as ever. If her actions strengthened it, it meant the inverse could be true.

They could be capable of controlling it; he could shut her out by his will, or he could force her to shut him out. If she meant to use their connection against him, however, then perhaps he would waste a perfectly presented opportunity if he shut her out. He could use the bond against her, instead. He was strong enough that he didn't require the help of a Force ghost, and the information he could gain would be exponentially more critical to her safety than anything she gained about him. He could think of no better way to end the bond for good than using her to destroy the Resistance.

This torture will never end as long as she is alive.

Kylo had to destroy her, especially now that he felt her energy fill an emptiness in his mind that had always been there, filling it so completely it was as if it was meant for her. No, this bond was not a shared fate created by the Cosmic Force. It was an infestation, a parasite draining him of his determination and strength. He would have everything he'd ever wanted if she would just die. His mind – in its infinite helpfulness – provided him an image of her on a skyway, falling into his arms as she grasped at a fatal lightsaber wound to her abdomen.

There was not a word in Basic for the bloodcurdling revulsion that passed through him at the sight.
of her unseeing eyes. He howled in a tumultuous fusion of anger, fear, and agony. Kylo had spent years training emotions away, but ever since he had heard the mere mention of her, he had lost his hard-won control. His emotions were spiraling; he was losing control again. Years of battling against them left him resigned to the inevitable result. In his fury, he snapped. Launching himself at his desk, he flipped it as far as his anger would carry it. Then he closed his eyes and surrendered himself to the overwhelming power of the darkness.
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See the end of the chapter for more notes
Rey sat contentedly next to Finn, their fingers intertwined as she and a few of the younger Resistance members watched Poe animatedly reenact war stories. They all held cups of alcohol in their hands. She had one to match, though she had poured out the vile liquid, replacing it with water. Rey craved desperately to belong, but she wouldn't touch the poison that she had seen seize control over too many people on Jakku, including her own parents.

The alcohol only served to liven Poe's retelling of his story; his body was relaxed but his hands more spirited as he performed for the crowd. He had seen worlds Rey could only imagine and had adventures far more exciting than she could dream of. The other members of the Resistance seemed to gravitate around him, and it was evident why. She found herself admiring him – the strength of his optimism after all he had endured, his intelligence, and his easy smile. Rey found that it was difficult not to mirror that smile, especially when he aimed it at her, which he did often. Poe was nice to her, and she found herself enjoying his company. He seemed so confident and hopeful, he knew who he was and what he was fighting for. He was everything the Resistance stood for and he made her feel like she had value there. He made her feel like somebody. His eyes found hers as he spoke, and her heart skipped a beat as he winked at her.

Maybe I have found my place.

At the moment, Poe was retelling his account of Kylo Ren's interrogation. “…blood is dripping into my eyes, and I’m still not sure that this guy is actually there, but I said, ‘You might want to rethink your technique.’” His story earned him scattered laughs from the other Resistance members. It was a brief moment of peace, but, like everything else in her life, Kylo had to ruin it. A chill shuddered through her as the Force vibrated around her. Poe's warm voice faded away until all she could hear was the steady inhuman breaths and mechanical hiss of his helmet. She found herself releasing Finn's hand in preparation for a fight.

Kylo was there, in the room with her friends, and the fear only served to increase the pounding of her pulse in her ears. Could they see him? There were no terrified cries, no hands at their blasters; no one else looked like their world had been upended. All their lives continued as normal, listening to Poe's recount of being tortured at the hands of the man sitting a few meters away from them. She could feel the intensity of his fixed glare, but she refused to look at him. There was nothing to see anyway, she convinced herself; every detail and expression was hidden behind a mask.

“Everyone out,” Kylo hissed, “Now.” Though she couldn't see most of his surroundings, she could vaguely see a table in her peripherals. She supposed he had been in one of his meetings, focused on galactic domination, no doubt conjuring up horrifying methods to kill her and her friends. The connection would close on its own soon enough. Until then she did her best to pretend that he
didn’t exist.

Kylo, however, had no intention of making it simple. “Let me guess, you still want to kill me.”

Rey bit her tongue. Everything in her wanted to turn and scream at him. *He* had tried to pull the lightsaber from her, *he* had tried to kill her and her friends on Crait. He had no right to make himself out to be the victim. She wanted to tell him those things, but she knew it was better for everyone if she ignored him.

“Or are you just disappointed I’m not dead where you *left* me?” he continued. “Sorry, you should have known after the last time you left me to die, I’m difficult to get rid of.”

As far as she was concerned, he was dead to her. Though if he were truly dead, it would have been easier. She could have enjoyed her time with the others without testing her limited control over her tongue. The galaxy would have been better off if he was dead, but she *didn’t* leave him to die.

“I know you can see me. I know you can *feel* me.”

She could. She could feel his anger permeating the Force around them. It was just another reason why she had to ignore him; the bond had grown strong enough. He could be angry all he wanted. It was his fault; he had nothing to be angry at her for. *She* had gone to the *Supremacy* to save him, she had helped him kill the guards, she had thrown him her lightsaber. *He* had chosen the darkness. Speaking of darkness, it was building in the Force around her as well. He was too predictable.

“Afraid what the other anarchists will say?”

Rey was grateful enough that, as far as she could tell, he was not visible to them. Rey wondered if it was only a capability of Force-users. If Leia walked by, would she see him? Or feel him? Rey wasn’t certain how it worked. Luke had been able to see him, but they *had* been touching hands. Rey never planned on touching him again, unless she was using her hands to drain the life from him. If that was the only way he was visible, then her secret was safe. She refused to consider what would happen if the Resistance discovered that a Jedi had a bond with the Supreme Leader of the First Order.

“Ah, you’re going to pretend I’m not here? That I don’t exist?” he said, his voice light with levity, but she could feel his resentment. “You’ll make the perfect Skywalker, then.”
Rey couldn’t bite her lip, she couldn’t clench her fist, she couldn’t do anything, or he would know he incited a reaction from her. Then he would win. She couldn’t allow him to have that. This was a battle with him just like any other, and she would win just as she always had before.

“Are you too important as the last Jedi to speak to me?”

Rey could see him in her periphery. He was seated, wearing his full regalia, gloved hands splayed on the long table. She could feel the tension in him; the turmoil. If she turned to look at him, she was certain he would look terrifying, but underneath, she recognized his fear and anger – his conflict – well.

“Or has Leia taught you how to pretend I don't exist?” he continued, though by the rasp of the vocoder, she could tell he had stood up. “She does have thirty years of practice.”

Rey’s jaw hurt with how tightly she clamped it shut. The Force was screaming inside – she was screaming inside – but she couldn’t allow herself the pleasure of releasing it. It would be too easy to give in to her anger, but she knew it was a path to the dark side. The last thing she wanted was to become anything like him.

“Did you forget your lightsaber? Blaster?”

He had circled the table, he was closer now. It was unsettling. She thought she had known the man on Ahch-To, but she didn’t know this man. What would he do?

“The traitor’s blaster is right next to you, why don't you see if it works this time?”

Her fingers itched to grab it, to test if the Force would still prevent her from harming him. If she didn’t fear where the bolt would land if it missed him, it would have been worth the risk. Poe winked again in her direction, and she smiled politely. The warm feeling she had felt before had turned cold with the arrival of Kylo.

“What has your attention so... ah, not what, but who?”

Rey knew he noticed her heavy gulp as she remembered that the connection had changed between them. Not only could he see her and part of her environment, but he could see the others as well. It was more dangerous than she had thought.
“Poe Dameron,” he spat, the vocoder incapable of disguising his disdain. “The best pilot in the Resistance.”

As Poe retold the gut-wrenching story of his torture, Kylo sounded as if he would be happy to do it again. Could he? Could his powers reach across the galaxy and rip apart Poe’s mind again? He would have to go through her first.

“What else is he to you?”

His voice was low. She could nearly feel the venom of his words. It distracted her from the insinuation of his comment.

“Does the traitor see how you look at the pilot? How does your ‘knight’ feel about that?”

The thud of his boots echoing off the floor matched the thrum of her heart as he drew closer. Her stare flashed to her friends and all that she could lose.

“I should have killed them when I had the chance,” he whispered, too close for comfort. She shuddered. His predator-like eyes had seen it, she knew they had. When he spoke next, it almost sounded as if he were smiling, or whatever the evil version of it was called.

“But you're probably thinking the same about me.” His voice was closer to her level, as if he had knelt beside her. Rey feared he would circle in front of her in demand for her attention. She shut her eyes in hope it would shut him out.

His tone was soft when he spoke again, too soft for the harshness of his words. “Look at me, Jedi – tell me how much you hate me.”

She didn't flinch when he cried out in frustration and threw something against the far wall. “Look at me!” She refused, silently begging the Force to take him far away, to let this be the last connection and end her suffering. After his outburst, he collapsed back into his chair, panting in agitation.

“I was wrong about you. You're no different than the others.”
His words hurt more than she had expected. If she hated him, why did she care that he believed she wasn’t different? Shouldn’t that have been a good thing?

“Fine. Let the bond burn for all I care.”

The words were whispered, perhaps that was why they were so difficult to ignore. He stood and disappeared from view. She thought he was gone, but he had to make one more inciting comment before he left. It infuriated her more than any of the others had.

“Though, after what you did, I should be the one ignoring you.”

Rey rolled her eyes, tilting her head askance. She waited to raise her stare until the last second, and was grateful she did when she met his piercing gaze. His last few comments, she realized too late, had hurt her so profoundly because they had been whispered in his voice. The loud crash must have been the mask. She wasn’t prepared to look into the eyes of this man. It was so easy to differentiate the two – Ben Solo and Kylo Ren – to pretend that the connections on Ahch-To hadn’t happened, when he wore his helmet. She had hoped she would never see his face again.

Rey refused to focus on his eyes, lest she found herself lost within them. Instead, she pinned him with a withering glare that conveyed every last disappointment she held for the man she had believed to be Ben Solo; the man who was suddenly at a loss for words. Rey broke the glare after she had sufficiently conveyed her rebuttal to his nonsense, and stood to leave. If he reacted violently again, she planned to be as far away from the others as possible.

Evidently, Kylo didn’t take too kindly to being ignored. He had saved the fatal blow for last. “Go ahead, Rey,” he murmured. “Leave without telling me why. Run away again. You’re good at it… just like your parents.”

With her back to him, Rey covered her mouth to suppress a sob. How dare he compare her to them. They both knew she ran away because he left her no choice. Rey didn’t say that, however. She couldn’t find the strength to say anything at all. Kylo didn’t say another word. The only sound was his shuddering breath until the connection snapped shut. Rey flinched when it did.
Chapter End Notes

Mild Violence

Jealousy

Kylo is Kylo and throws some things at a wall

Kylo shows jealousy toward other male characters
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---CHAPTER 10---

Rey was searching for Finn when she interrupted what seemed to be a Resistance meeting. Leia was there, standing before the entirety of the Resistance: Poe, Finn, Chewie and most of the other
few dozen remaining members. With her cane in hand – though she refused to lean upon it – the strong woman addressed them all. Rey hadn't been invited, but she supposed it made sense. She may have assisted them on Crait, but she hadn't involved herself with the cause. She supported the Resistance, of course, but in a way that resembled this moment – standing on the periphery, not quite an outsider, but not quite a member either. The purpose of the meeting appeared to be naming different planets. After only seeing the deserts of Jakku for most of her life, it wasn't as if Rey could help much anyway.

“What about the Tak-Beam Complex on Durkteel?” a woman offered in the small crowd. “The base was destroyed, but we could rebuild.”

“It's mid-rim,” Poe argued. “The First Order will find us within days.”

An Abednedo male spoke up, “We can't discount our bases on Yavin IV or Hoth.”

Leia shook her head. “We must assume that their high command has intimate knowledge of the bases used in the Galactic Civil War by the rebellion, even the secret ones.” Only then did Leia seem to notice her. “Rey, well aren't you a sight for sore eyes. Let me get you up to speed. I've called this meeting to discuss prospects for a new, temporary base as we strengthen our forces. The good news is – the First Order is not tracking us. The multiple transponders on this ship make it nearly impossible to track. The bad news is, for now, we're looking for somewhere uninhabited or secluded, as we suspect the First Order's reach is far beyond what we first expected. We will have our day to confront Snoke and his army –”

*No, you won't, Rey thought. He's as dead as the First Order should be.*

“No, you won't, Rey thought. He's as dead as the First Order should be.

“– but first we must rebuild our own army, and we need a base to do that – a base the First Order will not easily find. As you can see, we're running out of options.”

Poe leaned against the wall, arms crossed, “So, we'll have to pick one that is less well-known. Maybe one you've never been stationed at, General.” Rey understood the implications of his words. *One your son is not knowledgeable of.*

“How about Primtara or Horox III?” Lieutenant Connix suggested.

“How about Primtara or Horox III?” Lieutenant Connix suggested.

“Horox III is outer rim, but the base was destroyed years ago,” Leia said.
Chewie added his suggestion in a series of growls and grunts; most of the other members seemed oblivious to their meaning. Rey wasn't certain Leia understood particular words or used the Force, but her expression demonstrated understanding. Leia's voice was barely above a whisper when she answered him. “He knows about the hidden base on Corellia.”

“What about Generis?” Poe said, his calm voice reassured Rey that maybe there was still hope. If he wasn't worried, then their situation couldn't be too dire.

“It's outer rim, it's warm, jungle terrain for cover, but it was captured by the Empire in the Civil war. Its location would be in the archives of the Empire, which the First Order have accessed,” Leia reminded him.

“Your hi- General,” See-Threepio corrected, “Artoo suggests Lubang Minor. It is an unsettled planet located in the Illisurevimurasi sector of the Outer Rim Territories. Primary terrain is indicated as jungle, and the climate is tropical.

“Thank you, Threepio,” the general sighed. “That might be too –”

“What about Barkhesh?” Finn interjected. “It's outer rim, it has warm, jungle terrain for cover and a base.” Finn had definitely changed, Rey realized. The ease with which he assimilated into the ranks was heartwarming. It was difficult to reconcile the kind, caring man with the trained warrior of the First Order, but she was beginning to see the tactical side of him – the side that had crossed enemy lines to rescue her on Starkiller. He had found his calling.

“I've never heard of it,” Poe said brightly, his voice betraying his excitement as he slapped his friend on the back.

“Neither have I,” Leia admitted. “It'll have to do for now.”
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Kylo vibrated with energy, and nothing he did was enough to release it. He had trained until he couldn't lift his lightsaber, scoured the scrolls – the surprisingly Sith scrolls – that had been with Snoke's effects, had created tactical strategies to address several disobedient systems, had run the length of the Finalizer nine times, but he couldn't tire himself enough to sleep.

His skin crawled, his heart pounded, his mind wandered, his entire body was restless from the moment he laid down until he resigned himself to the fact that his time was better utilized on something productive. That, paired with the relentless nightmares of late, left him perpetually struggling to rest for more than an hour or two a night. He discovered he had more success if he forced himself into wakefulness for twenty-four to seventy-two hours before attempting to sleep. It had been more than ninety-six hours in this stretch, and there was no end in sight.

That was how he found himself in an officers’ empty break room at three-thirty Galactic Standard Time, overlooking the manufacturing floor as he paced erratically with a plate of food in his hands. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten; he did remember he had refused dinner from the service droids for the last few nights. Drawing energy from the Force to maintain his strength left him with little appetite. As did … recent events.

The food he did eat tasted like nothing. It made him nauseous every time he tried to find the will to swallow. Forcing food down his throat seemed like a spectacular waste of time – something he had endless amounts of in his current state – so he finished a flavorless Jogan fruit, then abandoned the plate with the other uneaten fruit on a nearby table. He resumed his pacing to channel the energy sparking through him like lightning.

Everything felt as hollow as his stomach. Life around him was colorless and dull, meaningless. He couldn't find it in himself to care about anything. He had become accustomed to this emptiness the better part of a decade he had spent under Snoke's guidance, but without the fear and purpose, he just.... existed. He did revel in the quiet of the night cycle, though.

Where he had once suffered in isolation, he was now overwhelmed with subordinates invariably pestering him about every last decision. There was always a report to read or meeting to attend. There was still the pervasive ache of loneliness that pulsed just behind his ribs, but now he felt it in the constant presence of others. Being Supreme Leader was not quite what he had imagined; he would do it, however, because the galaxy required order. This was what his grandfather had wanted to achieve, and he had done it. Just as he knew his fate was intertwined with hers, he knew this was his destiny.
That fleeting thought was all it took to span the bridge of their minds. Somewhere across the galaxy, Luke’s new protégé was lying in her bunk, peaceful in slumber, still fully clothed as if she hadn't planned on succumbing to sleep. Her arms were covered with wraps again. Kylo knew it was to hide the scar underneath. She was ashamed of it, ashamed of her connection to *him*.

The feeling was mutual; he hated seeing her as well. Everything about her was a reminder of how foolish he had been to believe he could have impossible things. He hated himself for not hating her as completely as he wanted. As conflicted as he was about her, however, he would still do what he needed to do. Not here, not like this, but he would kill her.

Her arms were wrapped around herself as she shivered, likely in response to hyperspace. The *Falcon* wasn’t as fortified against the freezing temperatures of space as a Star Destroyer. Though he knew she had plenty of people to keep her warm – like Poe Dameron – it bothered him more than he liked to admit that she didn't even have a blanket. His mind replayed her bleak and harrowing memories – shivering in her make-shift bed in the AT-AT, starving and lonely. An unanticipated rage pricked under his skin, directed toward his mother.

*How could she allow her to suffer like this? She's killing her own people. Is her rebellion worth this?*

In his anger, he upended the nearest table, sending the plate of food crashing to the floor. The darkness surged through his veins. He was furious at *her*, his mother, himself, and the Force for good measure. Before he had considered the consequences, his weapon was ignited, and the blade carved and slashed through every piece of furniture in the room. His muscles screamed in protest from his earlier training sessions, but the ache was familiar and centering. He forced his body to continue the assault until the lightsaber dropped from his hand in exhaustion.

“Are you quite finished?”

It was *her* voice. He whipped around to face her. She sat up in her bunk, arms wrapped around her long, slender legs. The golden flecks in her eyes reflected in the orange light radiating through the viewport. Her stare was what it had been in every interaction since Crait – closed off and emotionless. “You’ve wasted perfectly good food.” Her face was hardened in contempt, but her words were irritatingly calm.

Kylo clenched his fist to control his visceral reaction. All he could focus on was her *betrayal*. It was an emotion that ran deeper than any other. She was no different than Luke or his parents. He could have pretended he was apathetic to her if she hadn’t spoken, but with the sound of her voice, he felt the renewed pain of her rejection. The only problem was he saw a matching pain on *her* face, which was absurd, because she was the one who had tried to kill him and left him for dead on the *Supremacy*. 
“Oh, now I’m worth acknowledging?” Kylo grit his teeth before he said more. *He* was the Supreme Leader. *He* had all the power, not her. If he allowed her to provoke him, he would only give her that power over him. *Never again.*

“For Snoke’s supposed golden boy, you certainly are predictable, *heir apparent to Lord Vader.* All you care about is *worth.*” The way she said it was like a curse. Why did it feel like one, too?

Kylo did the only thing he could when knocked off-balance by her words, *again:* he dragged the conversation back to safer territory. “I doubt he thinks so now,” he said flippantly. It was a reminder, of what he had done for her, and what *she* had done to him.

She shrugged it off as if she hadn’t torn him apart and left him in pieces on the floor of that throne room. “You have all the power now; what do you care what he thinks?”

The words flew from his mouth before he considered them: “He was more my father than my own father was!”

The look that twisted on her face could only be described as pure hatred. She had no idea what Snoke had been to him, did she? He waited for her to pull a blaster on him again as she had in their first connection. As it turned out, she didn’t need a weapon to wound him.

“No wonder you killed him,” she said, holding his glare. His anger returned as he thought about all that had happened since then, tearing at the raw wound of her betrayal. He opened his mouth to respond with an equally venomous retort, when he heard a low growl.

It was her *stomach,* he realized; she was *hungry.* Her words had hurt him more than he had ever imagined, and yet, what ached the most was the knowledge that she could be going hungry. Again. The anger toward his mother grew. Was her desire to destroy him and everything he believed in worth *this?* Before he could control himself, he had called another Jogan fruit to his hand. He studied its white stripes long enough to adjust his grip. With a flick of his wrist, he tossed it on her bunk. Rey reached for it as if she could touch it.

It had been instinctive – throwing the fruit to her – but only after her fingers closed around its purple flesh did he realize the implication. She was not on the *Finalizer* with him. He had essentially thrown the fruit across the galaxy, it had landed on her bunk, and she could touch it. If fruit could pass across the distance between them, could a weapon?
The same realization must have passed through her own mind, because her eyes darted from the fruit to the lightsaber that lay abandoned on the floor. Her fingers tightened around the fruit before she met his stare. There was a question in her eyes, the same one that the darkness called to his attention. He refused to answer it, not that night. Kylo lifted his chin imperiously instead. “Take it, you need it more than I do,” he said with contempt, but her eyes softened slightly at his words.

Without a care that he was watching, she bit into the fruit. Kylo watched her eyelashes flutter as a drop of juice dribbled down her chin like a philistine. A strange feeling passed through him. It felt like... like reaching the fourth level of the Force, combined with facing an entire army with only a lightsaber and piloting the Falcon through the Maw. It was a feeling of unmitigated happiness. And it didn’t belong to him. One bite of a fruit he’d had countless times in his life did that to her. It sickened him, and he didn’t know what to do with the rage that curled through his fingers. So he lashed out. “I doubt the Resistance is feeding you well.”

“And whose fault is that!” The softness in her eyes had disappeared. They were burning with desire to hurt him, as if she hadn’t gutted him thoroughly enough already. Nevertheless, it was easier to see her that way.

It was ironic, he thought, that she would blame him for her circumstances. He had offered her the galaxy; she could have had access to everything he did. She chose to walk away. “You had your chance.” To join the First Order, he wanted to say, but he feared the words that would tumble out instead, to join me. “I remember what happened in that throne room, even if you pretend you don’t.” Kylo internally groaned that he had let such a vulnerable statement slip past his defenses. He wasn’t supposed to care, but now she knew the truth.

She hadn’t seen the opportunity for what it was, however. Instead, she resorted to the comfort of denial; crossing her arms, she shut herself off further from him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No? I think you do,” he said, gesturing to her arm wraps. “Are you hiding it from them or hiding it from yourself? Say it – you hate seeing a reminder of me.”

“Is that why you wear your mask?” she mocked derisively with an infuriating grin on her lips. “Do you hate seeing the reminder of me in the mirror?”

He ignored her attempt to incite him. “You can cover your scar, you can pretend Ahch-To was a nightmare, you can hide the bond in shame –”
“That’s not–”

“But I won’t let you forget if it’s the last thing I do.”

“I know,” she sighed, “I can’t stop hearing your heartbeat in my head no matter what I do. It’s like a ticking chrono. Because your cold heart still beats, people I care for continue to die. The reminder of what I should have done in the throne room haunts me every day. So don’t worry, I won’t forget, your heart won’t let me.” Everything in him wanted to stop. He wished she had reacted with anger rather than... this. When she was cruel, it was easier for him to pretend that she meant nothing to him. It hurt to see her and attempt to forget. “Can you just… go?”

“I would if I could. I liked it better when you weren’t talking to me.”

“It was a mistake,” she said as her fingers curled tighter around the fruit until its juice bled between her fingers. “But it's difficult to sleep when you're making such a … commotion. If we both agree to – ”

“It's difficult to sleep when you're in the same galaxy,” he spat back impulsively. He ground his teeth in disgust at himself for allowing her to incite him. She was needling away at the restraints on his darkness expertly, as if she knew the exact words to say to set him off. For the first time since Crait, he could feel her observing him, undoubtedly taking in the exhaustion in his eyes and the dark circles underneath. Her eyes guaranteed him she would show him no pity.

Good.

“Afraid?” she challenged. “That I will defeat you again?”

The darkness surged around him. His restraint snapped. “I’ll show you afraid.”

He moved toward her with fire in his blood, drawing the darkness in as his arm reached forward. He clenched his fingers as the fury pulsed through them, manipulating the Force to his will. She didn't flinch as the Force wrapped around her throat, threatening to starve her of air; not to harm, but to prove his power. Only, it hadn’t wrapped around her throat, because the Force didn’t work across the galaxy. She stared him down fearlessly, but it was the acceptance in her eyes that gave him pause. Knowing what he intended to do, she stared at him as if she expected it. The darkness in him itched to will the Force to touch her, to drain the life from her, to prove that his destiny was within his reach, but he released his grip with a start.
Weak. Foolish. Failure, the whispers in his head reminded him. Snoke may have been gone, but his influence was not. Kylo may have become the Supreme Leader, but he was no stronger than when they were in the interrogation room.

She snorted derisively when he lowered his hand. “Still as unstable as your lightsaber, I see.”

His brow twitched in challenge. He called the weapon to his palm and tossed the hilt back and forth between his hands, flicking his wrists to rotate it through the air. The weight of it was solid, familiar. “It gets the job done,” he said cruelly.

“Go away. I thought I’d at least be free of you in my sleep.” He bit back the sting he shouldn’t have felt. It proved her words in the hut, her assurances that he wasn’t alone, were more lies. He didn’t care to know why anymore. After what his family had done, he shouldn’t have been surprised that she would follow in their footsteps. She was their last hope, the only one who could stand between him and the rebels. He was under no delusion; she wouldn’t hesitate to kill him any less now than when they had first met. Only this time, she knew who he was; she just didn’t care. Neither would he.

Kylo tossed the lightsaber in his hand and returned her cold stare. He ignited his weapon and pointed it toward her bunk. “If you want to be free of me, you probably shouldn’t sleep there.”

“Why not?”

He pivoted on his heels and smiled to himself. “That bunk – it was mine.” There was a shifting sound behind him. He expected her to jump out of the bunk as if it had burned her, to prove that she would rather sleep on the refresher floor than sleep on something he had touched, but when he tilted his head to check, he was curious to find she remained in the bunk, only shifting to turn away from him.

Her arms were still wrapped around her torso, but he would rather walk through lava than bring her a blanket. His darkness was still suffocating the Force around him, and he decided the fragments of furniture weren’t nearly unrecognizable enough. It wasn’t as if he would sleep anytime soon anyway. With a lazy flourish, he began the onslaught again.
Violence

Kylo destroys things

Kylo threatens to Force choke Rey, though he ultimately does not
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Rey needed an escape from her thoughts. When the conflicting emotions inside her made it impossible to sleep after her confrontation with Kylo, she sought her friends for comfort. She couldn't be alone with his presence in her mind, taunting her... tempting her... any longer. She
quietly sat at the dejarik table next to Finn and Poe. They had raided the cabinets for supply bars and ration cubes. It looked lightyears more appetizing than portions.

"Rey, are you feeling...okay?" Finn asked carefully. She could blame her lack of sleep solely on the foreign sensation of hyperspace travel. After crying into her bunk all night, she imagined she looked a bit worse for wear. It hadn't helped that she was already wide awake before she interrupted the giant man-child she was connected with through the Force.

"I'm okay. I've just been processing a lot, you know? This has all been...eventful. I'm just grateful we'll be on solid ground soon." She smiled her best fake smile, and the trusting man that Finn was – despite his harrowing upbringing – took it at face value. Rey knew she had to tell him the truth eventually – he had been honest with her – but she didn't know what to say that wouldn't risk losing the closest thing she had to family since escaping Jakku.

How could she explain her bond with Kylo? The last time she saw him awake before Crait was during their fight with Kylo on Starkiller, when her eventual bondmate nearly killed Finn. Even though that fateful night had only occurred a few weeks ago, it felt like an eternity. Without her tally marks scratched into the hull of her AT-AT, she was losing track of time. Since leaving Jakku, so much had happened – so much she couldn't explain.

"Are you sleeping? Is it nightmares?" he asked softly. "About him?"

"Something like that," she replied, a tender grin lifting her cheeks. Finn cared; there weren’t many in her life that did. It thawed her cold heart. "Thank you, my friend, for caring."

"I woke up terrified for you," he admitted, "That monster had just killed Han. I saw the evil in his eyes. He was strong... and fast. I don't know how you did it, Rey."

"And I heard she gave him a giant scar down his face to remember her by!" Poe added, "I wish I could have returned the favor after he tortured me… Well, “torture” isn't a strong enough word for it. What am I saying? You were taken prisoner," he said, gesturing to Rey. "You know that mind-splitting agony too."

Rey blushed. "Yes... I remember."

"What did he do to you?" Finn demanded. Her friend had always been protective of her, but there was an edge to his voice that warned of danger. "I swear to you if he..."
"Don't worry; he didn't really hurt me, Finn," she insisted. “It was uncomfortable and humiliating when he searched through my private dreams and memories, but I was able to force him out of my mind. Then I searched his instead and scared him off. He never even looked for the map before I escaped."

"And there I was, thinking you needed to be rescued," Finn laughed. Rey smiled. Perhaps she hadn’t needed rescuing in the classic sense, but she was grateful he had cared enough to come back for her. Her spirits were temporarily lightened, but there was… something… something inside her… a silent voice that had always there, and it was demanding her attention. What it wanted her to know – it felt wrong, like a… warning. She had felt it before; in the forest of Takodana, overlooking the skyway on Starkiller, in the throne room on the Supremacy. Now it was warning her again, danger, but it wasn’t until she heard Poe’s foreboding words that she understood why.

“Wait, you’re telling me you had seen the one thing he was willing to kill and torture anyone for… and all he did was search through your dreams?”

Poe’s countenance had changed in an instant; his smile had disappeared, and the warmth had faded from his eyes. He stared at her suspiciously, but it was his voice that left her the most uneasy. He had never spoken to her with such distrust before.

Her heartbeat quickened under his interrogative tone. Rey was still new to meaningful social interactions that weren't centered around quid-pro-quo. She found herself relaxing in the presence of her new friends, but she had clearly said too much. A tingling panic twisted up her spine. She chose her reply warily, careful not to reveal any more incriminating information.

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

“And then you nearly killed the man who could freeze blaster bolts and carry on a conversation like it’s nothing? A man who has destroyed worlds. You. A scavenger from Jakku who had never been trained with a lightsaber? Had never even held one?” She swallowed her offense at the demeaning air to his words. Why had his disposition changed over a simple recount of her interrogation? Why was he being so cruel over nothing? Didn’t he trust her? She was confused, Poe had always been kind to her.

That sounds like something Kylo would say. Will you call me “nothing” next?

“Well, he was injured,” Finn interjected, coming to her defense. She smiled at him in gratitude.
Poe, however, would not be so easily convinced. “And yet he easily bested you, a trained killer of the First Order, and left you for dead like it was nothing.” Though he was speaking to Finn, Poe’s eyes never strayed from hers. She felt naked, exposed, just as she had in that interrogation room. Even though this man did not have the Force to confirm his suspicions, it was as if he looked right through her defenses anyway.

What does he think he knows?

Rey did not have a satisfactory answer for why the events had turned in her favor. She fidgeted uncomfortably under his accusatory gaze. She knew she should tell them that more had happened between Kylo and herself than they knew. They deserved to know, but his demeanor frightened her. If he became angry over the trivial events of the interrogation, what would he do when he discovered the truth?

How could she explain to them that the man in the hut was the same man who had tortured one of them and nearly killed the other? How could she make them understand when she didn’t understand it herself? How could she explain that she risked everything – their lives – to go to him on the Supremacy? How could she tell them that she agonized over a bond that she still shared with him? What would they think of her? What would they do?

“I think he’s scared of her,” Finn joked, breaking the heaviness in the air.

“Yes, that must be it,” Poe agreed, though his tone was less jovial. His charming demeanor had returned, but his voice was deeper, more... wary. “You are a force to be reckoned with, Rey, no pun intended.” He smiled and winked in a way that made her pulse quicken. He returned to his food, but she could almost see the wheels turning in his head. The abrupt change between suspicious and charismatic disconcerted her. Her intuition – that voice inside her – told her not to trust him, and that terrified her. If she couldn’t trust a member of the Resistance, who could she trust?

"How is Rose doing?” she asked Finn, changing the subject. She knew Finn had been preoccupied lately with sitting vigil at her bedside, and though she hadn’t sat with him as much as she had wanted, Rey still wanted him to know she cared.

"Good, I think,” he said, his smile fading. “As good as she can be.” He glanced away, and Rey realized Finn was clearly not comfortable yet discussing this new woman with her. She would make friends with her, too, proving to him that he had no reason to be concerned.
"They had quite the adventure sneaking on the Supremacy," Poe said conspiratorially, though his smile dropped for a second, and she could sense the regret in his voice. “They were so close to preventing this disaster.”

"You were on the Supremacy?" Rey choked on her food. "When it was hit?" A slew of new fears rattled around her mind. Could they have seen her or known that she was there? If they asked, how would she explain why she had gone there, or why she hadn't told them?

"Yeah, it was nice to get a little payback. Too bad we couldn't take out Snoke...or Kylo Ren...while we there," Finn replied dryly before tilting his head back and tossing a bite of food into his mouth. Poe mimicked the action, tossing it higher. Based upon the cheers of the others, catching food in their mouths was a game. There was so much about social interactions Rey had yet to understand.

"At least Snoke is dead..." Rey said around her own mouthful. She took several more bites of food with her fingers before she felt the weight of the silence around her. She glanced up slowly. They stared at her in shock, utensils abandoned mid-bite, and she wondered if she was doing it again – acting out of the societal norm. She reached for a utensil in shame.

"What?" Poe finally rasped. Only then were the consequences of her words made apparent. She had hoped they knew; Leia was Force-sensitive, after all. Considering how high profile that monster was, she had presumed the entire Resistance had learned of Snoke's death by the time they reached Crait. Someone else would have had to step up as Supreme Leader. Certainly, the holonet must have mentioned something. At the very least, wouldn't they question whether Snoke survived the destruction?

"Yes...I... well, I... felt it...in the Force," she stammered. She hoped her lie was convincing enough, though, realistically, she knew it wasn’t. After growing up on the unscrupulous planet of Jakku, Rey had learned to lie to survive. Those practices carried over to her time with the Resistance. It had been natural to lie to Luke on the island and now to her friends to protect herself, to survive. Her lies had gone unquestioned until she met Kylo, and he saw through every single one of them.

It had destabilized her, having another person see through everything to who she truly was. When he had exposed her lies, she hated the vile, slimy feeling that clawed inside her. She didn’t want to feel it again, not with these people – not when the truth and its consequences actually mattered. Her fear overwhelmed her. Her breaths became short and fast, her body trembled. No, it wasn’t her body, she realized as the others stared down at the table. It quaked violently under her clenched fists.

What is happening to me? How am I doing this?
Rey stood abruptly, excusing herself from her friends. "I have to go. I forgot I have to check on something."

She smiled, but the skepticism on their faces was evident. Finn tried to call after her, and she felt Poe’s eyes burn holes into her back as she stood up. It was all too much, and she felt something building inside her, demanding release. In her haste to escape, she crashed into Chewbacca. The Wookiee caught her before she fell, stilling her in his large, furry arms. Though he had distracted her from her meltdown, her entire body began shivering in a new fear and... something else.

*That smell.* She couldn’t remember a single detail about her parents, but she knew exactly why that smell was familiar.

“Chewie, what is that? Why do you smell like...”

*Ben.*

Rey caught herself before she said something she couldn't explain to her friends. He cocked his head and responded in Shyriiwook, which, thankfully, none of her friends were able to understand.

*Trillium Soap? They use the same soap?*

He patted her knowingly. He knew what she was asking, who she was thinking about, because he knew who else used that soap in his thick and unruly hair. She remembered that before he had been her confusing bondmate, before Chewie had wounded him on Starkiller after he killed his best friend, Kylo had been a boy the Wookiee had once known well. Chewie also knew where she had gone before Crait. He had been the one to dry her tears, after all, when he had rescued her from Snoke's escape pod. And he was the one to tell her there was still hope to turn Kylo after they saved their friends. There was a time and a place to grieve, he had told her, and a time and a place to fight. It had reminded her very much of Han. Chewbacca had been nothing but supportive of her – more than she could say for Luke – and she liked to imagine Han would have been the same.

She was most thankful that Chewbacca mentioned none of that as he took her space next to her friends, allowing her the grace to tell them in her own time. Her friends were curious about their strange exchange, but none of them said another word. Rey left before the tears began to fall or she began moving objects unwittingly again.
Why does everything remind me of him? Why can't I escape him?

Rey felt her thoughts flow into the space his consciousness held in her mind. No sooner had she screamed those words than she felt the Force around her begin to buzz. The sound around her became muted. She could feel a tightening sensation in her mind before the familiar silence in the Force. Another connection was impending; she could feel it. She ducked into the nearest cargo hold and fell against the door as it closed behind her.

There he stood in front of her at the viewport of the Command Bridge, as if she had been instantly transported to the Finalizer. She was falling apart remembering the smell of him, but this man was not the remorseful man she had seen on his knees on Crait nor the capricious one she had seen since. His shoulders were squared, his voice as steady as the dysfunctional mask would allow, his gloved hands casually gesturing. His physicality exuded sovereignty and confidence. His restrained demeanor and poise reminded her of the interrogation room on Starkiller, but this version was stable ...yet intimidating. His commanding energy drew all eyes to him.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Without a doubt, Rey knew that this... this was what Kylo Ren looked like. This was not the gentle man from the hut on Ahch-To; this was the enemy that everyone else saw. It should have made it easier to hate him. He chose the First Order instead of the light, instead of her. He had killed his father, tried to kill Finn, tortured Poe, caused Luke's death, tried to kill his own mother – and Rose and everyone else in the Resistance, for that matter. He tried to kill them all. She wished she had her quarterstaff to beat him over the head with it until he bled light. Every second she watched the man should have solidified her belief that there was no hope for him, but with his smell still tormenting her senses, she couldn't forget the memories of the man she believed would turn.

His back was turned to her, but she could see that he was speaking with another member of the First Order with neatly combed red hair. That man stared around the room, and the movement of his stare was fluid as it passed over her, almost as if he were looking through her. There was no reaction to her presence at all. Her friends had been equally ignorant, so she knew it was unlikely that she was visible for him. There was someone she was visible for, however. Rey held her breath, hoping Kylo wouldn't notice her, while also finding she wished he would. She listened to his conversation intently, trying to find the answers to what had happened to him in the throne room.

"Excellent, Hux. When your troops narrow down which of those planets is harboring the last of the Resistance, you know my orders." Kylo pressed the release on his helmet and removed it. The red-haired man eyed him suspiciously, but he did not comment. She almost turned away so she wouldn't have to see him when he looked upon her with Ben Solo's eyes. The other officer spoke next, and, although it sounded as if he was underwater, she was able to hear him clearly.
"We will execute on sight. No prisoners. But what of the girl?" She held her breath, knowing what "girl" the officer meant.

"The orders are clear, are they not?" Kylo said. It was his voice, but it sent a chill down her spine. Even under his mask, she had never heard him sound so... inhuman. Burning betrayal twisted through her chest as Kylo turned and glared directly into her eyes. His pupils were blown, his eyes black and emotionless. They were not the eyes of the man who saved her from Snoke. These were the eyes of a monster. She tried to suppress her tears, the agony squeezing the air from her lungs until it hurt to breathe. He had known she was standing there the entire time.

*Don't say anything, don't you dare give him the satisfaction.*

"Should she not be held on trial for her assassination of the Supreme Leader?" the other man replied. Kylo hesitated, never taking his cruel eyes off her.

"Leave her to me. I can feel her through the Force; there is nowhere she can hide that I can't find her. I'll hunt down every last rebel. I'll force her to watch me kill them all. Once I've destroyed everything she loves, then I'll destroy her, too." He said it so calmly, so apathetically, it sounded as if he was talking about nothing of consequence. She clenched her jaw so the sob wouldn't escape her throat.

“Are you sure that’s wise? She has defeated you twice...” the other man sniveled, and it was clear to Rey that these two men were not on the best of terms.

Kylo interrupted him. “And she was foolish enough to not finish it. It will be her own destruction.”

"Yes, Supreme Leader," the other man said in a tone far from reverent.

*Supreme Leader?* Those words stung more than the others. Certainly, she should have realized. He had killed the previous Supreme Leader, after all. He had asked her to join him there. Why *wouldn't* he be the one to ascend the throne? The events of the throne room made better sense now. She swore she wouldn't say a word, but she felt so exposed, so betrayed.

"You killed Snoke, you coward!" her voice trembled. "You call Finn a traitor, but the traitor is you! Why don't you tell them all what really happened? You didn't kill Snoke to save me; you killed him to become more powerful. You used me to help kill your guards, because you weren't strong
enough to kill them on your own! And then you blamed it all on me! Luke was right. I was so foolish. I fell for it all. The bond, the vision, the whispers in the elevator...everything...it was all an illusion by you. You didn't want me to join you. You just wanted someone to blame your mess on. There is no light left in you. I will not shed a tear for a monster.”

He walked past her slowly and deliberately, as if she were nothing. His words from the throne room echoed in her head. **You’re nothing to this story...You’re nothing.**

“You just used me, because I'm nothing, right?” she whispered.

Relief flooded her body as he suddenly disappeared, back to his ship across the galaxy. She could feel the cold trickle of darkness slithering against her consciousness, and, in a moment of weakness, she allowed it in. It had found her in battle, but she never realized its other benefits – it fed on her fear, anger, and despair, minimizing the nagging thoughts of loneliness, abandonment and betrayal and easing her emotional pain.

**Rey**… a voice warned. **Luke.**

She pushed his warning aside. Luke didn’t understand, he hadn’t even wanted to teach her, because she went "straight to the dark.” He was jaded by what happened to his father and his nephew, but they had chosen the dark side. Rey wouldn’t. Nothing terrible had happened in the cave Luke had warned her about; she had used the darkness on Starkiller and not fallen to its temptations. She was stronger than Kylo; she could control it. She supposed this once she could allow a little more in, and then a little more, until she felt nothing. Only for a moment of peace.

She was startled when foreign voices whispered in her head. It sounded like the whispers of the Force she had heard on Takodana and Ahch-To. The others echoed the sentiment, but one dominant voice was familiar. This wasn’t the vague calls of the other whispers of the Force; this was the one from Starkiller. **Kill him,** it had commanded her back then. She hadn’t listened, but she bemoaned the heartache it would have saved if she had.

The whisper continued to guide her as it had then. **He only killed his master for power...You mean nothing to him...That is why he so willingly brought you to be tortured by his master...He never cared for you...He chose the power and the darkness over you...He ordered for you to be shot down on Crait...He told Luke he would destroy you...He will kill you and your friends...You must kill him first...** The voice disappeared into the Force as a cold wave flowed over her, calming her.
"Come find me, Kylo. I dare you. I'll be ready. And this time, I won't spare your life."
"You just used me, because I'm nothing, right?"

Kylo managed to make it around the corner before he sensed the bond close behind him. The second he knew she was gone, he let his body slump against the wall. He was trembling, his breath uneven, his eyes filled with tears. "Not to me," he whispered.
By the grace of the Force, he had remained rigid and poised for his performance. Kylo had foolishly removed his mask, because he had yearned for her to see that he didn't care any more than she did. He wanted her to know that he was better off without her. Every word he had spoken, every twitch of emotion in her eyes, however, chiseled at his resolve, the act too taxing to continue in the storm of emotions crashing through him. It was all he could do – escaping her – before he allowed her to see the truth.

Swallowing his misery, he clenched his fists in an attempt to maintain control until he reached the refuge of his quarters. There was no room for denial; her mere presence had brought forth the conflict again. After she finally spoke to him the night before, he realized that his resolve to kill her would be tested every time he heard her voice or looked into those expressive eyes. After hours of torment following their last connection, he decided that severing the bond was the only method he could employ to ensure his focus remained on his true and only purpose. He could only hope that his actions had indeed severed it, ending the emotional torture. It had always been his weakness – emotional pain. It would fade with time, he convinced himself, delving deep into the darkness, using the torment to acquire strength.

Kylo hastened through the dark corridors, hoping someone would look at him wrong. He yearned to unleash the emotions threatening to rupture through the last restraints of self-control. A droid crossed his path, and he sent it rocketing down a corridor. Stormtroopers altered course when they noticed him. “That’s right, fear me!” he sneered through gritted teeth. His knees were shaking by the time he reached his quarters. It wasn’t until the door slid shut behind him that the pretense fell away, exposing the truth. His legs couldn’t support the weight of his burdens.

What have I done?

The betrayed look in her eyes brought him to his knees, but it was the agony that she felt...that he felt through her...that evoked the animalistic moan from deep inside his soul.

No! She betrayed me! She refused me! She only used me to save her friends. She left me for dead! How can she feel so betrayed over something she wanted! How can she believe everything she said? When I offered everything to her? I offered her the galaxy!

He tried to catch his breath, but his entire chest twisted in anguish. The emotional torment was overwhelming. He considered driving his fist through the mirror so he could find focus and relief in the physical pain, but his legs were too weak to stand. When they were in the throne room, he didn't care about the light, the dark, the Jedi, the Sith, Resistance, the First Order...he didn't care about himself... that woman had suddenly become his reason to breathe. With the death of Snoke, he finally had the power to become someone worthy, he finally had someone to share it with, but then she had betrayed him.
By leaving him alone on that floor, what had she expected him to do? Kylo had to take control, he had to fulfill the destiny bestowed upon him. After she did the one thing he could never forgive, all he wanted was to get down to the base on Crait to finish it. So he became the monster. He did what he had been born to do... destroy. He wanted her to hurt, as deeply as she had hurt him. She had seen him, truly seen him. She was supposed to be different than the others he had been foolish enough to care about before, but she wasn’t. She had tried to kill him, as if everything that happened between them meant nothing. Perhaps – to her – it did.

The current condition of their bond was her doing; she deserved everything that he had said on the bridge. She deserved to suffer. He knew that, still he found witnessing the pain he caused her the worst torture he had ever known. It made no sense. If she was suffering, too, there were only a few conclusions he could deduce. The most obvious conclusion was that he was wrong; she did care, but that was impossible. If she cared, why would she betray him when he offered her everything he had? There must have been another cause for her pain – a darker, ulterior motive.

The worst part was he still obsessed over what she wanted from him, as if anything he did would ever be enough. Despite his profound desire for the contrary, it meant Snoke was right. He did have undeniable compassion for her. He was weak; but just like every other weakness he possessed, it could be trained out of him with time. Until then, he could only invest his confidence in her hatred of him. He had to believe that she had the strength that he didn't to end the bond for good. They would both be better off. They could return to their opposing sides in peace. His conflict would fade without her presence, and then they would meet again on the battlefield. There was not a doubt in his mind that the finality of their bond, the war, everything rested in their intertwined destinies. The Force had made that abundantly clear.

That realization provided him little consolation in his current state, however. Opposing, turbulent emotions twisted through the Force around him. He knew he needed to calm them before they became uncontrollable and destructive. He needed a distraction. Forcing himself to stand, he calmly removed his gloves. His boots echoed on the floor as he stepped closer to the mirror in front of him, determined to destroy it. He never avoided eye contact unless he was standing in front of his own reflection. Slowly raising his gaze, he met the eyes in the mirror.

The eyes of a monster.

Self-loathing burned the other emotions away. The mask by his door was quickly becoming an enticing alternative to staring into his own eyes. It provided him a sense of power and freedom in its intimidating anonymity, even if he had mastered disguising his emotions through years of hiding the darkest – or lightest – recesses of his mind. Practice gained him moments of expressionless neutrality, but his face always betrayed his emotions in the end. Even now, as he stood alone in his chambers, he could see the twitch of emotions in his scowl, and his eyes revealed even more. He hated everything about the man in the mirror.
Ben?

He froze and listened intently. He swore he heard a voice call his name, but it wasn’t Rey. If he didn’t know any better, he would say the voice belonged to Leia. But it had been years since he’d heard her speak that name. The thought of her drained him of strength. He must have imagined it, he convinced himself. Ever since he killed his father, he was fracturing, barely holding himself together. Now he was imagining voices.

Kylo absently combed his trembling fingers through his hair, making his appearance more orderly, but the distraction had stolen his thoughts and engrossed them. He thought of his youth when Leia played with his dark wavy hair, teaching him her world’s customs and telling him how he would have been revered as the Prince of Alderaan.

What are you doing right now, Leia? Have you found happiness in your surrogate son who doesn’t disappoint you? Are you pretending I don’t exist? Or are you planning my assassination? Was this what you feared when I was a boy?

When you pulled my hair into Alderaanian braids – against Han’s constant objections – and taught me royal customs of an obliterated world, did you find it ironic that the man you feared I was becoming was the very man who destroyed Alderaan? You tried to make me the prince you always wished I could be, while lying to my face about who I truly was. Fantastic memories.

You denied the Skywalker and Solo in my blood. You denied your father. You held onto ghosts. You couldn’t let go of your past, the good or the bad. But you couldn’t escape it, either. Forever the princess, even if not by name. An Organa. And I was to follow in your footsteps.

You filled my head with your visions of me rising high in the political arena of the New Republic. But dragging me with you was what led to my rise in the First Order. I bet you didn’t imagine that, did you? No, you were too blinded by your work in the Senate to see any of it. I watched you fight the Senate. They never took your fears seriously. You sacrificed time with your family, gave everything to them, you left me alone with the voices in my head – and what did it get you?

They did nothing.

Nothing ever progressed. Thousands died in civil wars and famine, and even as the First Order rose from the ashes of the Empire, no one would heed your warnings, because you were the daughter of Darth Vader. And I was the grandson. That was all I was ever going to be to them. It
finally made sense why everyone I loved feared what made me unique. In the New Republic, it would have held me back. You should understand that more than anyone.

But here, I am the Supreme Leader of the known galaxy. I never had an interest in joining the military command. I was here to destroy your brother for what he did. But Snoke left me no choice. How could I deny this opportunity of being somebody in my own right? Not Princess Leia’s or Captain Solo’s son, or Master Jedi Luke Skywalker’s nephew. Not even Darth Vader’s grandson. Here I am, Kylo Ren. And the galaxy fears me.

I wonder if somewhere deep down you are proud of what I have become. I did what you never could, what none of you, not even my grandfather, could do. What would you say if you were here? Or would you say nothing? Would you walk away again or would you try to kill me, too?

As if he was no longer in control over his own mind, his thoughts supplied what Leia would do if she were there. She would tuck his hair, the unruly hair like Han’s that she loved so much, behind his ear. She always did that. Her smile would be weary, but familiar, though now her head would be tilted remarkably higher in order for her tired, jaded eyes to meet his. The image sickened him, and he clenched his jaw in anger, allowing the darkness to numb the pain and deepen it.

You wouldn’t stare at me with love. Not anymore, not after I killed Han. Or maybe you would. I felt things I shouldn’t have felt from you on the Raddus. Would you look at me like he did, now that it’s too late? When I was a boy, Han would stare at me like he wished I was someone else...anyone else. There were moments on the Falcon when Han almost acted like a father. When he pretended to be impressed with my skills as a pilot. I wanted nothing more than to become a pilot like him and make him proud. I could see brief moments where Han was proud, but it would always fade.

Han never knew the hours I spent when he was away on his trips, practicing and practicing from dawn until dusk to find ways to impress him, so he wouldn’t leave again. But you did – you saw it all, even if you pretended you didn’t. And you still defended him. I even tried to shut myself off from the Force for Han, but the moment it came surging back again, I felt the distance grow. I was never going to be the son Han wanted. Ever.

I wish I had taken after Han’s side - no Force powers, no emotions, no ambition to change the galaxy. I wish I had never been born. I was a burden to you both. I heard your whispers behind closed doors. How could I not with the Force heightening my senses every waking moment? You sent me away because you didn’t want me, because you feared what, no, who you saw in me. You abandoned me when I needed you the most. You let me find out about Grandfather on my own. You left me to that monster – not Snoke – your own brother.

When I was growing up, I heard the fantastic adventures of Luke, Han, and Leia saving the galaxy - mostly from others, of course; you were all too busy for me. They risked their lives infiltrating an
imperial base to save you. Han braved the temperatures on Hoth to save Luke. You put yourself in
danger to save Han — trapped in Carbonite — from that Hutt, Jabba. You fought for each other on
Endor. Luke even risked his life to fight to turn your father from the Emperor.

But none of you loved me enough to come for me. You would fight for the New Republic and for the
Resistance, but not for me. I wasn’t worth it. I was your son! Your brother forced my fall to
darkness, but you left me with him, and you left me to be destroyed by Snoke, even after
I saved you. I was gone six years, Leia! Do you have any idea what he did? Ben is dead. It was
years too late when Han came for me. But he didn’t even come for me, did he? He came for her.
He came for the Resistance. And then with his dying breath, he had the nerve to tell me he missed
me, begging me to come home. Come home to what?

He didn’t want me, I couldn’t be any less like him. He thought I was weak because I couldn’t
control my emotions...the Force...my passions. Han tried to distance himself from me any chance
he could. The thought of any similarities between us was just too uncomfortable for him. Instead,
every time he came back from his long trips away, he’d tell me with that condescending
exasperation that was so Han, “Don’t look at me like that, kid. You have your mother’s eyes.” I
don’t see your eyes. I see what Rey sees - the eyes of a monster. Has Rey told you about what
happened between us? I am a monster. Now I look like one.

He admired the long scar down his cheek. It split the right side of his face in two. It began above
his right eyebrow and continued under his eye down his cheek and neck and onto his shoulder. This
is her scar. Has Rey told you how she gave me this one? I earned it that night in the snow on
Starkiller. After I killed your Han. Do you hate me even more for what I did to him? I do. Do you
wish I had died instead? Me, too. She had her chance, but she gave me this scar. If only you could
see the scar she gave me in the throne room. She was the perfect little acolyte, unfortunately for
you, I saw through it all. Were you disappointed that she didn’t finish the job then, too?

Or were you disappointed that I didn’t turn as you all naïvely believed I would. How did you know
I wouldn’t kill her when you sent her to me? Or was she only as important to you as her use for
you? That’s how I was, to both you and her. That’s all I’ve been to anyone. That is how I know
with certainty that you’ll fail her, too. She has darkness in her, Leia; she needs a teacher. Do you
even care? Or will you throw her away, too?

I see the truth now; there will always be that pull to light until I can destroy my past. But
destroying my past includes destroying her now, thanks to you and Luke. Why did you have to take
her from me, too? You’ve made her my enemy; I have to kill her. It didn’t have to be this way. You
didn’t have to turn her against me.

The next time Rey and I meet, one or both of us will have to die. I don’t know if I have the strength
to kill her, but the First Order does. I set all this in motion, and there is nothing you can do about it. What you and Han stubbornly refused to realize was that my fate has been sealed since you left me with Luke.

It’s too late for me, but it’s not for her. Not yet. Don’t send her for me again unless she plans to kill me. My choices will inevitably lead to her death, because I am the monster you all feared I would become. The Resistance is not worth her life. I promise I won’t touch your precious rebels if you give her the means to escape from your pathetic group of anarchists. I know it makes no sense. I should want her dead. But the thought of losing her... destroys me in places I thought no longer existed. I want to hate her, but no matter what I do, I can’t. I thought it was impossible, but I think it’s her, Leia. The girl.

With those words, the reflection in the mirror changed. He imagined his mother standing before him inside the mirror, tears streaming down her pallid face as she placed her hand against the glass. Without contemplating the madness of his actions, he lifted his own hand, dwarfing hers as he pressed it against the mirror. Tears blurred his vision as his anger ebbed, only for a moment, as he studied his mother’s aging face.

“My Ben, my sweet Ben… I should have… I’m sorry,” she whispered, her eyes welling with the lifetime of love she would never have the chance to give him.

Kylo collapsed forward onto the table in front of the mirror, his weight on his hands. He dropped his head as he attempted to control his breathing. His broad back shook violently as he battled the anxiety intensifying with every passing thought. His hands curled into fists as the wounds of his past were reopened.

When he glanced again, his mother was gone. He slowly straightened, glaring at his reflection in the mirror. The man in front of him looked less like a monster and more like a frightened boy. It disgusted him. Screaming into the empty room, he thrust his fist into the mirror as hard as the Force would carry him, the shattered pieces falling around him like rain.
Chapter End Notes

Mild violence

Kylo breaks things
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Sunlight reflected off the rain like glass as it fell through the canopy of trees above them. The canopy obscured the sun, casting the trees in shadow, except for small beams of light that penetrated the darkness. The atmosphere around them was heavy and... suffocating. They were surrounded by a dense, green jungle in every direction she turned. Rey noticed the rain was warmer on this planet than on Ahch-To. She stuck her hand out to feel the droplets on her palm but withdrew it quickly at an unexpectedly sharp sting. Examining her hand, there were red, round marks on her palm.

"Where are we?" Rey asked, backing farther up the Millennium Falcon's open cargo door. She
watched other Resistance members unload their limited, but vital, supplies onto the planet. They were wrapped in coats... blankets... any material they could find to brave the weather.

"The Outer Rim," Poe replied, "Barkhesh."

"There used to be a Rebel Base here, but we hit a bit of a setback. The droid scouts just returned, and the base has been destroyed. There seems to have been a battle here at some point. The Empire left behind some old AT-ATs and supply crafts. It has temples similar in architecture to the ones used by the Rebellion on Yavin 4. We will set up a temporary base in a temple until we can find supplies."

"The planet is scarcely inhabited, but they were allied with the rebellion under the Empire. Leia believes they will help us again, if there are any tribes left. We are desperately in need of supplies. The First Order has no business here, but the surrounding rainforest gives our ships excellent cover if they come searching. Oh, and you may want to find something to wrap around yourself; that’s acid rain."

"At least it’s not sand, right?" Finn teased, hoping to lighten the mood, as he put his arm around her. They stared out at the vast expanse of trees. He sighed. "Rey, I... There’s something I need to tell you."

"What’s bothering you, my friend?" Her smile hid the fear shivering up her back, wondering if he knew the secret she had been keeping.

"I don’t know why this was so hard for me to tell you – maybe because you haven’t been the same since you came back from Ahch-To," he hesitated, "But something happened when I went on that mission with Rose, and I don’t know how to feel about it, and I’m... scared, I guess, that it will change things between us."

Rey sighed in relief. He didn’t know anything about Kylo; he was simply nervous to tell her about a woman he met. "Finn, why would that change anything between us?"

"Because I don’t know if my feelings toward her are ‘friendship’ feelings," he said softly, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. He jolted in surprise when she jumped into his arms.
“Finn!” she squealed. “Don’t be nervous! I’m so happy for you!”

“But you know it doesn’t change anything between us, right?” he said, his brows still furrowed in concern. “You were the first person to see more in me than what I was; you’re my best friend, no, my family. You mean everything to me… but so does she, in a different way. I don’t know if I’m explaining this right…”

“I do, I understand,” she said. Though her smile remained, the brightness behind it did not. Rey did understand what it was like to care for two people in profoundly different ways, one no more important than the other. Finn would always be her family, her first friend, and she knew from his concern that she would always be his. Friendship to her was natural; effortless and uncomplicated, soul-healing and unconditional. It felt like the warmth of the sun on her face on a breezy day.

What she had felt toward Kylo had been nothing like that. It was impassioned and intense, but also intimate and profound. It felt like a live wire, but also like … like touching hands by a fire in the rain. Though, her feelings toward Kylo were more akin to her feelings regarding the acid rain on Barkhesh than the pleasant rains on Ahch-To. Kylo wasn’t the man she had believed him to be. None of it was real, but she remembered what she felt like when she believed it was. Rey could only hope that what Finn had found was real. It hurt; not because Finn had hopefully found something beautiful, but because she wished she had found that, too.

They were distracted by a commotion behind them. General Leia collapsed as she walked down the boarding ramp. Rey learned she had been weak since Kylo damaged the bridge of the Raddus, but Rey wondered if what was truly destroying this strong woman was the toll of death and war. Every hour seemed to drain more life from her. Poe tried to carry her to the temple, but she refused, being the stubborn and proud woman that she was. He helped her walk on her own instead. Poe held a blanket over her head to protect her from the rain. Finn carried Rose in his arms, a tarp protecting them both.

Rey trailed behind them quietly, a heavy grey blanket wrapped tightly around her. The light that penetrated the canopy cast dancing shadows around them. Stalks of massive blue and purple flowers veined with yellow towered over their heads, the caustic rain gently drummed off the petals harmlessly. Thunder rolled through the valley as they headed deeper into the rainforest and Rey did everything in her power to not think about the last time she had heard it.

The jungle around them was otherwise quiet, giving off the illusion of tranquility – and it would have been – if not for the veiled danger. The rain, the flowers, the quiet all seemed innocuous, but Rey grew up on a harsh, unforgiving world. She knew better. The rain was burning, the flowers were poisonous, the quiet meant predators were near. They were in perpetual danger from every direction. Would they ever find a place where they were truly safe?
Rey followed the trail of boot prints imprinted in the fine crimson soil in front of her. The soil stained the puddles collecting from the rainfall, leaving small rivulets that flowed like blood across the rainforest floor. Rey shivered, fearing that it was an omen for their precarious circumstances. How long could they hide until Kylo and his evil legions found them? What would they do? Luke Skywalker was no longer there to save them.

All at once, the forest around them disappeared as they entered a clearing, and an immense stone temple loomed before them. It was polyhedral in nature, stone steps carved into its steeply sloping lateral faces, the entrance carved into the apex.

Leia insisted on climbing, supported by her cane, up every single stair to the entrance of the temple. As they entered the archway, Rey noticed a beautiful flower growing out of a crack in the stone, partially trampled by the other Resistance members. It was ivory with purple and teal threading through the thin trumpet-like petals. She knelt and gently extracted the roots through the cracks, carefully wrapping the delicate flower in the folds of her blanket. Leia insisted on walking every stair down to the private chambers, so Rey swiftly caught up to them again. As Rey walked behind them, she noticed the burn marks on Poe’s hand. It had been the one that had held the blanket over Leia in the forest. He had suffered acid burns to ensure Leia didn’t.

He loves her more than her own son does.

"Let’s set up everything in the main ceremony hall," Poe shouted to the others as he walked Leia into one of the lower level rooms. Finn set up bedding on a sleep mat that he laid on a stone altar for Leia. Poe helped Leia onto the makeshift bed. Finn and Poe seemed caught between preparing their new temporary base and remaining by Leia’s side.

"I'll sit with her," Rey offered. Leia grasped her hand and smiled. Poe and Finn left to finish unpacking the ship.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Of course," Rey replied. She looks so... pale. The Force was strong around the woman. It almost felt as if it drew itself away from Rey to surround Leia.

"No... thank you," Leia said again, looking in Rey's eyes, insinuating more than Rey had originally perceived. Her heart pounded in her chest.
"For what?" Rey asked carefully.

"For bringing Luke back to us," she said. Rey inhaled sharply. The name stung. "And saving us all."

Tears of shame rolled down her face. "Because of me, Luke is dead, and we are all in peril. I wouldn't be thanking me."

"Luke died with purpose, remember?" Leia reminded her. "And because of you, we made it off Crait. Don't be so hard on yourself, Rey. We love you." Her voice was barely above a whisper, but it was kind and gentle. She didn't deserve to be loved by people like them, not when she carried the secrets she did.

Rey stared down at her hands. "Have you felt Luke's presence?"

"I feel it even now," Leia replied, "He's waiting for me." Rey nodded and stifled a sob. The thought of the galaxy without Leia was terrifying. They needed her to win this war.

"And Han?"

"I don't know. Han was never strong with the Force. When he died, I didn't sense his passing as I did with Luke. I only sensed my son's grief and remorse over what he had done. I don't know if he is waiting in the Force. I truly hope so. Han... didn't understand the Force. He didn't want to understand it. But that's what made me fall in love with him in the first place," Leia said with a smile.

Rey was desperate to know more about this family she was inexorably drawn to. "How so?"

"When I first met Han, I hated him," Leia replied with a huff. "He was selfish, stubborn, arrogant and always right, at least in his head. All he cared about was money, and I was an annoyance to him. And according to him, when we first met, he wasn't sure whether he wanted to kill me or kiss me." She paused for a moment, lost somewhere in the past. "He was everything that a princess should have hated. But there was something else there, underneath that rough and hardened exterior. He was witty, worldly and spontaneous, especially when it came down to decision-making. He was brave, honest and rougishly handsome..." Leia smiled as Rey blushed. "And when we needed him the most, he came back and helped save us all."
"Then...what happened?" Rey asked, realizing belatedly that she had likely been too forward.

"Life, as it does," she said with a sigh. "I put my heart into helping govern the New Republic. That wasn't Han, as much as I tried to make it be. He never wanted to be in one place for too long. He missed the old days on the Falcon and the freedom of open space. And then with Ben... He didn't understand the Force, especially with Ben's intensity, so it was hard for them to connect.

"Ben was more like me. He was sensitive, emotional, and passionate about changing the world. Han loved him, so very much, more than anything. He just didn't understand him. The only understanding they shared was Ben's natural skill as a pilot. On the rare occasion Han brought him on his travels, they both came home... happy. But the Force growing in Ben conflicted with what I think Han had always hoped for in a son. He had hoped for a life for his son without the complexity of the Force. It destroyed Han to watch Ben suffer, knowing he could do nothing to help him. He felt like a failure when we sent Ben away to Luke's temple. All we wanted was our son back from the darkness that tormented him.

"When Ben... when we lost him, we both felt guilty. Han was never great about talking about his feelings," she huffed a broken chuckle. "We let a galaxy grow between us with everything we didn't say. I wish I had tried harder when he was here; I just never thought he wouldn't be." Leia paused to catch her breath, though Rey wondered if she was trying to swallow the same sorrow she was. "That's not true; I think part of me knew he wouldn't be here. He was holding Ben when he was just a baby, and I told him that one day he would be a grandfather. Do you know what he told me? 'Speak for yourself, sweetheart. Me, I ain't ever getting that old.' I felt something in the Force then – call it intuition – and I knew he was telling me the truth, even if he didn't know it then. I also felt that 'intuition' when I told him once, long before Ben was even born, 'someday you're going to be wrong, and I just hope I'm there to see it.' I wish I hadn't been.

"Han had his faults, but he was always there when we needed him most. We never stopped loving each other or holding out hope that one day Ben would come home." She smiled through tears. Her eyes were sullen...hopeless. "I know now that will never happen."

Guilt tightened in Rey's throat. She had been so close to bringing Kylo back to his family, and Leia had no idea. She had failed, just like Han. What was the point of telling her that she had seen the light in him if he had chosen evil in the end? Rey wanted to never speak or hear of Kylo again. Let the past die, he had told her, and she wished she could. Unfortunately, her bond with Kylo could put them all at risk. Leia needed to know.

"Leia. It's about Kylo... Ben…"
“Like I said about his father,” Leia murmured drowsily, “He’s got to follow his own path. No one can choose it for him. His father came back for us when we needed him most, but Ben is not coming back. I held out hope for so long, but he made his choice.”

“But you don’t understand —”

Leia interrupted her. "I'm sorry, Rey. After Crait, I just don't have the strength for any more heartache right now. Whatever it is, it can wait. You look exhausted. I'm sure you could use a few hours of rest too." Leia smiled and squeezed her hand, her eyes fluttering shut.

Rey nodded and began humming softly – a song inspiring sorrow yet hope – the only soothing tune she could remember. Her thumb caressed soft circles over the hand of the woman who would be the closest figure she would ever have to a mother as she slowly drifted to sleep.

On the edge of unconsciousness, Leia asked softly, “Where did hear that lullaby?”

“I don't remember,” Rey answered, leaving her hand in Leia’s grasp, sobbing softly, as the broken woman fell asleep. Rey sat with her as she slept, wondering how the legendary story of the Skywalker family would end with the ultimate betrayal by a deeply loved son. *How could you do this to them, Kylo? If you could only see what you have done to your own mother. I know you’ll never tell me. Or you'll lie. Your family loved you. Luke made a mistake, but at least you had a family. How did it all end up like this?*

Rey felt the gut-churning sensation of his presence in the Force. As their connection grew taut, his energy enveloped the room around her. She held her breath, awaiting the inevitable. Her eyes scanned the room, but he never appeared. A different presence entered the room.

"Hi," a soft voice said behind her. Rey turned. A woman with smiling eyes and raven hair had joined her at Leia’s side. Though she had only seen her unconscious, she knew who she was. *Rose.*

"Hi, I'm Rey," she smiled.

"Oh, I know who you are. Everyone knows who you are! You helped destroy Starkiller, you fought Kylo Ren and won, you brought Luke back and rescued us all! You're a hero!" The woman giggled awkwardly. “I didn’t know what you looked like, but I saw you sitting here, and I knew it just had to be the last Jedi they’ve all been talking about. I said to myself ‘Rose, this is someone special.’"
"Nice to meet you, Rose," Rey beamed, "Finn has told me so much about you. I'm glad to see you are finally awake. You had us all worried."

The woman blushed and quickly sat down next to Rey. "Yeah, nothing like kissing a guy and professing your love for him, then finding out you were in a coma for days. Talk about awkward."

"You love Finn?" Rey asked. Did Finn feel the same? He had told her he felt romantic feelings toward the woman; was it love? The word caused something dark and slimy to build in her chest. Rey forced it away as best as she could.

Rose’s smile wavered. "Yes...I do...I know you two are close, and I hope that's not..."

Rey interrupted her, realizing what her tone likely implied. "No, I'm happy for you!" she smiled genuinely. "And him. Finn deserves to be happy. I'm sorry if I sounded upset." Rose expression looked skeptical, so Rey continued without considering the consequences. "I just... had a guy break my own heart, and I guess I let the envy get the best of me."

"You seemed like you were really deep in thought when I walked in. Was that about this guy?" Rose shifted closer and placed her hand over the Rey’s in a gesture that was kind and sincere, but it reminded her too much of another hand.

Rey didn't know this woman, but something in the Force told Rey she could trust her. She was surrounded by people but no one she could truly talk to, not about this. "Yes. Can I trust you?"

"You’re in luck,” Rose said. “My sister Paige was much better at giving advice, but I’m excellent at keeping secrets.”

Was. Rose had lost people too. The way Rose was looking at her was not as a member of the Resistance, but as a friend. Rey believed she would keep her secret. Releasing a slow breath, she made her decision. “I can't explain it, but there’s this guy that I can’t stop thinking about. It’s... complicated. Really, really complicated. But he can find me through the Force, and that means he can find me here. I don't know if I should go. Leia is too weak to talk about it, and I’m not ready for everyone to know the truth," she confessed to this woman she had known five minutes. Despite the implications of her words, Rose did not appear frightened or angry at all.

"We are family here, Rey. I don't know much about the Force or this guy, but I do know that we
are here for each other, no matter what, because we are all we have. Please stay." Rose smiled and surprised Rey by hugging her. Rey wrapped one arm around her awkwardly, her other hand still grasped in Leia’s. She smiled in the woman’s embrace, the loneliness ebbing if only for a moment.

“Ben, I’m sorry,” Leia whispered quietly next to them. Rey swallowed a sob as they turned and stared somberly at the sleeping mother.

Chapter End Notes

Mild Injury

Rey receives an injury on her hand
The Machine

Chapter Notes

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General Hux smiled through the Holovid. It was a diagram of a complex machine comprised of a deep, round, electrified chamber. There was a circular platform in the center of the chamber, hovering off the floor by powerful magnets. Affixed to the platform was a large, vertical glowing Kyber crystal partially submerged in a pool of liquid. Two circular revolving bars surrounded the platform. Smaller, glowing kyber crystals were attached to the inside of the bars. The diagram illustrated how extendable walkways connected to the platform for easy access.

The machine was labeled FORCE DESTINY.

The general closed the Holovid, handed it to an officer and nodded, dismissing him. "The pieces have fallen into place perfectly."

"What pieces, General?" The vocoder of Kylo’s helmet hissed and spat as he spoke, but he held his head high as the Supreme Leader should. Kylo waited for Hux's smile to fade, as it usually did when he entered the bridge, but it only grew wider. The general's eyes resembled a predator’s, and Kylo was only familiar with them looking more like prey. Kylo’s pace slowed as he sensed he was walking into an ambush. His eyes narrowed. He had the impulse to choke Hux, to regain control over him again, but he was too curious about what he was going to reveal.

"Force Destiny, of course...Supreme Leader," he chuckled. Kylo was grateful for the emotionless expression the mask provided as he searched the general's expression for the meaning behind his words.

"Force Destiny?" He managed an unconvincing chuckle. "This better not be your next Starkiller base, Hux. Its design flaws were too extensive; I will not risk creating another one." Kylo had wanted nothing to do with the first one. He would never allow Hux to create another. The control he had felt over the situation was fading. The dread started to crawl under his skin, as the Force clawed at his intuition. Something was coming. Something big. The general had a different air about him. He did not seem as careful to choose his words. His fear of a physical reaction was missing from his relaxed demeanor.

Hux smiled. His words were derisive and mocking. “Are you telling me that the mighty Kylo Ren, Snoke's very own apprentice, was not made aware of Force Destiny?”
“Should I have been?”

Hux stared at his gloves, adjusting them with casual inconsequence although his words were anything but. “I suppose not; it’s just the detailed plan put in place to be carried out at the event of his untimely death.”

_The what?_

He hadn’t realized he had said the two words aloud until Hux’s eyes flashed up to his visor. His General began laughing, but Kylo couldn’t find it in him to be angry as his mind reeled. Snoke’s plan. Snoke had a plan. Of course, he had a plan. Why didn’t I see it before? “This is just too good,” Hux continued in a fit of laughter. “You’re telling me you have no knowledge of the most powerful machine the Dark Side has ever created.”

His patience was wearing thin. The general continued to laugh at him, and Kylo couldn’t allow him that advantage. “Do I have to _pry_ it out of you? I don’t think either of us wants me inside your mind.”

His threat had the intended effect. Hux’s face pinched in disgust. “This machine manipulates the Force and individuals like yourself and Snoke who are sensitive to it. It can take life… and _restore_ it.” He eyed Kylo, waiting for him to make the connection, waiting for fear or panic to tighten or shudder through him. Kylo hid behind his mask, but, internally, he was terrified.

_No. It’s impossible._

“Certainly, you’ve studied it in all of your _extensive_ training sessions,” Hux continued. “Why wouldn’t you; Snoke had first-hand knowledge of the machine, after all. But surely _you_ know better than anyone that Snoke lived before. How did you think he was reincarnated last time?”

Kylo was thankful for the mask. “Snoke was… reincarnated before,” he said, more to himself than his subordinate, attempting to wrap his mind around something straight out of a nightmare. He briefly considered whether he was suffering hallucinations from sleep deprivation. His spiraling thoughts were drawn back to focus when Hux spoke again.

“He was betrayed by his own apprentice.”
He could barely conceal the shuddering fear in his voice. “What did you say?”

“That was why he had to be reincarnated before – he was betrayed by his own apprentice. You were his apprentice for all those years, surely he told you that your own grandfather once knelt before him as you did?” Hux paused, watching him for a reaction. The implication of his words shuddered down Kylo's spine. He knew Hux noticed. “Or did he have reasons not to trust you, Ren?” The general stressed every word as if he was giving one of his inciting, demagogue speeches.

*If Vader knelt before him, then he was... Sidious.*

It was impossible, yet his intuition screamed that it was true. Kylo could not find his voice to answer. The general's smile was wide and malicious, his eyes wild with excitement. The gravity in the room felt heavy, crushing the breath from Kylo’s chest. His stomach churned. In an instant, everything had changed. Whatever the consequences, he decided in that moment that he could not allow them to succeed in building that machine. He cleared his throat. “When will construction begin?”

“It already has,” the general replied clandestinely. “The machine will be mobile. It should be constructed in time for the repairs to be finished on the *Supremacy*....”

“The *Supremacy* is salvageable?”

“Yes, thankfully the anarchists did not damage any vital components with their little stunt. Kuat-Entralla maintains that the severed starboard wing will be a labor-intensive but relatively uncomplicated, fix.” Kylo hated surprises. He was the Supreme Leader. How had he not known any of this? Once the general realized Kylo would remain in agitated silence, he continued. “Once the *Finalizer* docks on the finished *Supremacy*, *Force Destiny* will be transferred to its permanent location. Perhaps the throne room?”

“Any other news you care to share?” Kylo managed to rasp.

“That is all,” the general grinned derisively. “For now.”

"Carry on, then,” he replied as flatly as the hurricane of emotions raging inside him would allow. “And contact Bazine Netal. Inform her to send for the Knights of Ren.”
If I'm going to do this, I'll need all the help I can get.

He turned and walked slowly yet deliberately off the bridge, refusing to make eye contact with any of the officers.

"It was an ingenious plan if you think about it, Ren," Hux called after him, "Even you should know that darkness can not be destroyed. And when you're at the top, everyone else wants your power. There's only one place to go. Someone is bound to betray you eventually."

Kylo swallowed his fear as reality crashed through him. He manipulated the Force to remain upright as Hux continued shouting after him. "Soon, Force Destiny will be finished, and Snoke will return to lead the First Order to domination over the entire galaxy!"

When Kylo was out of sight, Hux turned around to contemplate the vast expanse of space through the large viewports of the bridge. "Who are the Knights of Ren?" he wondered aloud. "Did Snoke have an army of Force users he kept secret? A week ago, this news would have been unnerving, but that was before my little discovery. This will be easier than anticipated. Snoke’s secret weapons will play into my hand perfectly."
Chapter End Notes

Vague description of death

Force Destiny is a machine that takes lives and this briefly describes that
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Kylo stood, his hands clasped behind his back, as a Kyber crystal taller than him was lowered into a chamber in the floor. *Force Destiny.* At least, it would be, soon enough. It was in a well-guarded room, behind three code-secured blast doors, in the highest classified section of Weapons Development. A quick skim of a Bothan contractor’s mind—an expendable liability who would likely “go missing” after he finished his top-secret assignment—revealed that Hux outdid himself with redundancies. The largest obstacle Kylo discovered was that the majority of the controls for the machine were housed on the Command Bridge rather than in the room itself. Kylo screwed his eyes shut as a wave of fear crashed through him. Even as the most powerful man in the galaxy, he still had no command over what happened. There were too many redundancies, even with the assistance of the Force. With Hux’s distrust, he would be executed for treason long before he was able to destroy the machine.

*I can’t stop it.*

As his emotions began to spiral, Kylo had enough sense to download the schematics of the machine onto his holopad before he was lost to the control of his fear or the darkness, whichever one consumed him first. Would there ever be a moment when his emotions didn’t control him? Would there ever be a moment when he had control over anything? All he wanted was peace; freedom from the fetters that bound him, that dragged him down into an ever-constant state of emotional drowning. Other Force-sensitives possessed the Force. Whether it was the light or the darkness, the Force possessed him.

Approaching the end of the corridor, he should have turned right to make his way back to his quarters. As the fear inside him escalated, he found himself turning left. He had no plan of where he wanted to go, he simply felt drawn to follow that path. It wasn’t often that he allowed himself to surrender to the will of the Force; instead, he would fight it for the sake of fighting. Not this time. The nightmares kept him awake, food was repulsive, a permanent ache had taken up residence in his chest, the fear and anger that fed the darkness were slowly consuming him alive, and his master would return. Nothing had changed since he had come into power; nothing was better. He couldn’t find it in himself to care, so he let the Force guide him to wherever it pushed him to go, even if it was down a maintenance shaft.

*I can’t do this anymore.*

Kylo hated ships. He had always wanted to be a pilot, but with the Force, he found it impossible. On world, if his emotions unraveled, he could find a secluded place to “discharge” them; but on a ship? His only option was controlled destruction, or he’d blast a hole in the ship with the Force. His father had been too nervous to fly with him as he grew older, and for that—and that alone—he didn’t blame him. It was simple physics to understand what a hole in a ship would do in the vacuum of space.
Kylo's emotions were always volatile, but right now they were at their worst. A violent reaction was inevitable. An ever-strengthening voice in his head made the argument for allowing the Force to blow a hole in the ship. If it was a strategic enough placement, the entire destroyer could implode, bringing Force Destiny down with it. His master could never return, and Kylo would be at peace.

He had never considered the option of taking his own life before. Granted, he never valued his life – why would he when no one else did – nor was he particularly fearful of his inevitable fate, but he hadn’t considered it. He'd fought too hard to survive Luke's attack to waste the opportunity for revenge. Even as a boy, he had trouble believing he would live to see his thirtieth standard year. It was a milestone that was swiftly approaching, and even now he hadn’t considered that he would reach it. He often found himself complacent toward his own mortality, or even invincible, due to a litany of close calls that had desensitized him.

Still, he’d never considered taking fate into his own hands, that is, not until he killed his father. Then Luke died, and his strongest reason to survive died with him. That seemed like a good enough reason as any to end it all. No one would know the evil he prevented from being unleashed upon the galaxy, but Kylo never cared much for fame anyway. He found himself walking toward the stern of the ship, approaching the power and propulsion center.

The reactor. He could blow them all to Hell. Good enough.

Would it be, though? Would it be good enough? He had only just learned of Hux’s plan. What if there were contingencies? What if there were others? Would he be stopping anything at all? If he removed this ship with its high command, it could leave the First Order weak. Who would bring order to the galaxy, if not them?

Kylo was passing the garbage compactors when he heard the shrill shrieks of a droid in trouble. Kylo had learned binary and droidspeak before he’d learned Basic from his family's many droids. He had no doubt the droid was begging for help. The First Order droids were programmed to be cold and ruthless, nothing like the droids he had grown up with. This one sounded more childlike, lost and afraid. His own spiraling fears subsided as he focused his search for the droid. Opening a garbage shoot, he found the droid lodged halfway down, grasping the walls with its compressed liquid cable tethered by its launchers.

“Don't be afraid,” he assured it. “I'll help you.”

With a swift manipulation of the Force, the droid began to lift effortlessly toward him until it had reached the farthest extension of its tethers. “Trust me; let go,” he murmured. The droid surprisingly did trust him, and he was able to drag it out of the hole it had fallen through. Kylo learned quickly that the droid – a young, male personality, black and silver BB series astromech
referred to as BB-10XZ—hadn't fallen.

The droid told Kylo a story of being treated like an object, property, as many droids were still subjected to throughout the galaxy. He was told he was a failure, broken, inferior, and worthless until he believed it. They called him BB-10XZ, but all he wanted was a real name. The others laughed. Quality tests marked him as defective because he was too much like the 'lesser' BB-8 units. Finally, he was thrown away with the garbage, told he was "not useful enough" to live anymore. He sustained damage to his occipital sensors when he had fallen, effectively making him as worthless as they had insisted all along. Kylo swallowed past the tightness in his throat, blinking back his emotions. He wished he didn't understand how the droid felt.

His previous mission temporarily abandoned, Kylo guided the droid to his side. Using the Force as a tether, he helped guide the BB unit with the slightest adjustments of the energy around him. Not a single officer noticed the odd pair, or, if they did, they had enough sense not to glance his way. He guided the droid back to Weapons Development, finding a droid development room. The astromech enjoyed tumbling his way through the room as Kylo search for spare BB units, or sensor parts. His search was unsuccessful, but he was able to find a manual for that series.

As he left the room with the droid in tow, he noticed a blonde-haired contractor exiting the room adjacent to Force Destiny. It also contained a large, vacant chamber, and he was curious about what else Hux had up his sleeve. “What weapon is being developed in that room?”

The contractor stared at him in an odd mixture of reverence and fear. “Whatever you would like to be developed, sir.”

_I am the Supreme Leader. I am the Supreme Leader. I can make whatever I want, it’s my ship, these are my weapons, I can stop the Force Destiny without blowing this place. But what can I make to stop...“Can we create a rapid-freezing carbon chamber?”_

“Sir?”

His mind was already a thousand steps ahead. If the other man said anything else, he couldn’t hear him over his frantic thoughts. He turned on his heel, nearly forgetting the droid as he took off toward his chambers. After the astromech whined in sadness, he stopped and guided it with the Force until it caught up to him. He had the manual; he could fix the droid and then he could drop the droid off on the next on-world trip he made.

Once inside his chambers, he used the Master Comm to demand one of the officers to find schematics for the freezing chamber from the Empire archives. Then he collapsed into his chair,
throwing the manual on the desk and opening the schematics for *Force Destiny* on his holopad. The droid asked warily what Kylo wanted the manual for; what he would try to fix.

“I'll fix your sensor,” he promised the droid as he scoured the holo. “You don't need to fix anything else.” The droid continued to stare at him, but Kylo didn’t notice. He was analyzing the holovid that explained how the machine functioned. The more he watched, the more terrified he became of the implications.

The Holovid demonstrated the three different applications for the machine; the first explained how to remove the lifeforce of an individual, the second explained how to save a dying individual, and the third explained how to reincarnate an already deceased individual whose lifeforce had previously been imbued upon an object.

The first application was simple. The machine could be used to drain the lifeforce from a living Force-sensitive subject. It operated by strapping the subject onto the vertical Kyber crystal. When the control lever on the panel was dragged into the “up” position, the machine rotated the revolving bars forward until they were moving at high enough speeds that they created a spherical bubble of Force. Once the Force sphere was created, energy – quintessence dark energy – was pulled from the electrified chamber into the Force sphere. It reacted with the energy from the Kyber crystals, and that energy traveled into the subject standing in the liquid on the platform. That energy was absorbed into the larger crystal, removing the lifeforce from the subject and transferring that essence into the Kyber liquid. The liquid containing that lifeforce was removed and saved for later use or discarded to be replaced by another Force-sensitive’s lifeforce.

The second application was more complicated. It detailed how the machine was used to contain the lifeforce of a dying subject, then transfer that lifeforce into an inanimate, previously Force-sensitive body. The control lever on the panel was moved into the “up” position, as it was done in the first application, and the lifeforce was removed from the subject and transferred into the Kyber liquid. The body was then discarded. Another viable body – typically drained of life by the first application – was strapped onto the vertical Kyber. The control lever was pulled into the "down" position. The machine rotated the revolving bars backward, and the energy was pulled from the large Kyber outward, removing the lifeforce essence from the liquid and into the inanimate body, reanimating it.

The third application required freshly melted Kyber liquid containing no lifeforce. The liquid was created as a byproduct of the machine when the Kyber melted in the reaction between the crystals and energy, but it could be flash frozen and stored in large containment vats. An imbued object was placed in the fresh Kyber liquid. The machine was started with the lever dragged into the "up" position, removing the essence from the object and absorbing it into the Kyber liquid. As in the second application, an inanimate Force-sensitive body was strapped onto the vertical Kyber, and the control level was dragged into the "down" position. The lifeforce from Kyber liquid then transferred into the inanimate body, reanimating the soul in the new body.
I’ll destroy it all – the entire galaxy – before I allow him to return.

Chapter End Notes

Vague death description

Force Destiny is a machine that takes lives and this describes the process

Suicidal contemplation
Kylo considers blowing up the ship to prevent the future he sees as inevitable from occurring. These will be reoccurring thoughts for Kylo. Please message me for more information about clarification on his future thoughts/actions if this is your trigger.
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Rey moved her few belongings into one of the quiet underground chambers of the temple. The chambers were aligned in a spiral, connected by elaborate corridors decorated with stunning wall paintings by an ancient civilization. She had chosen a room on the farthest edge of the spiral, isolating herself from the rest of the Resistance.

The rooms were crafted entirely from stone, leaving a cold, damp feel to the air around her. The most depressing aspect of the rooms was the heavy, impenetrable darkness. No light from the outside world could reach the shadows there. The only light in her room was artificial, created by the disposable glowrods she had affixed to the torch sconces on the wall. Despite the artificial light, the vaulted ceiling was eternally cast in darkness, a constant reminder of the presence hovering tormentingly close in the back of her mind.

She set up her makeshift bed on a stone slab at the center of the room. It was more comfortable
than what she had on Jakku, so she didn’t mind. She rummaged through a box of droid parts by her bed, finding a concave piece to set the flower in. She scooped some dirt from the floor, burying the roots in a bed of crimson. Then she gently poured some water over the delicate, bruised pedals from her canteen.

“Don’t worry, I can fix this; I can save you.” She set her pack onto her bed and sighed, glancing around the empty room. Her best friend had saved them all by bringing them to this world. She was grateful he had found his place. The Resistance would thrive there until the First Order inevitably found them and they had to run again. Though Rose had assured her she could stay, the woman had no idea the danger lurking in Rey’s own mind. She was the greatest threat to them all.

Rey knew she couldn’t stay there. If she loved them – which she did – then she knew what she had to do. She didn’t have a choice. Her connection could lead him straight to them. Either she left the new base, or they all died. After what she witnessed on Crait, she knew without a doubt that he would kill them all. They would stand no chance against him. I have to leave before he sees this place.

The Force stole the choice from her, actualizing the very fear she had tried to prevent. Her breath caught in her throat as she felt a tightening in their bond. No, no, no, no, no, please, no. The Force vibrated around her, drawing them together. She was immediately surrounded by his darkness.

Not again.

Rey was overtaken by fear. That is, until she saw him. Kylo was seated at a desk. She could see his profile; his back slightly turned toward her. He was scouring over strategical plans on his screen with an intense desperation she could feel. It must have been important, because he closed them when he sensed her.

It’s probably plans for how to destroy the Resistance. No, what am I thinking? He doesn’t plan; he just makes up his evil as he goes along.

“Can we not do this now?” he sighed. He made no other move to acknowledge her existence. It was agonizing to see him again. It was easy when he was gone to force herself to forget, but the moment she saw him, everything came flooding back, like removing a fallen boulder from a river. There was anger and disappointment, yes, but there was also a part of her that yearned for the man in the hut. Without his mask, it was not difficult to see that man in him. She hated it, because he wasn’t that man White-hot anger shot through her like electricity as she stared at him, and the darkness found her to soothe it. She allowed it in.
"Get out," she growled. He did not turn to look at her, instead fixating on clenching and unclenching his hands on the desk. Her chest heaved as she stared at him, her body shaking in anticipation.

*He doesn’t care… He thinks you’re nothing to this war, but you can show him… Kill him…*  
*Save Leia, Finn, Rose, Poe, your family. Do the entire galaxy a favor… No one will miss a monster… You will be the Jedi that the galaxy needed… You will be important and wanted…*  
*Show him that you’re not nothing,* a voice in the Force whispered.

Rey had been unsure what it was when she had first heard it. She assumed they were whispers from the Force similar to the ones that had called to her on Takodana and Ahch-To. These whispers different; they were less of a shepherd and more of a mentor, though they were decidedly more partial than she had expected from the Force. Perhaps she had been chosen because the Force knew she would be its vessel.

"Where do you want me to go? I won’t ‘get out’ of my own chambers," he responded, "I have no more control over this than you do."

*How can you be so calm! Like nothing ever happened between us! Why must I be connected to a monster! It sickens me to even look at you –*

She had almost said it — his chosen name — but it felt wrong. She could call him that name to the others, why not to him? It was the name attached to the man he had chosen to be, was it not? Yet, Rey couldn’t bring herself to utter those seven letters to the man in front of her. She refused to let him win and call him "Kylo Ren." He didn't deserve to be called "Ben," either. Not anymore. There was a war inside her; a battle between the truth whispered in the darkness and her own deeply entrenched hope that he was more than the monster he had become. The darkness won.

“This isn’t fair!” she shouted. It was directed less at him and more at the Force. “I don’t want to be here! I didn’t choose this! I didn’t ask for this stupid bond! I don’t want it! Why do I have to be bonded to you?"

Kylo clenched his jaw, turning away to stare off at the opposite side of the room.

*Oh, is the Supreme Leader too good to look at a nothing scavenger? I should kill you right now and do my friends, the Resistance, Leia, the entire galaxy a favor!* As she said the words, a part of her begged her to realize that they weren’t her own, but she refused to listen. Her hands were clenched in tight, shaking fists. She wanted to hurt him like he had hurt her. He smugly kept his back to her, disinterested enough not to bother to look at her.
"You still want to kill me? You should have taken the chance on the Supremacy. Or was I not 'sporting' enough while unconscious?" he whispered, barely audible. Her body jerked with fear.

Could he hear me? How could he hear my thoughts? Can he hear these thoughts? Can he hear any thoughts I have ever had? No, no I can't think like that. I would go crazy. Luke was right, every time we see each other, the Force bond grows stronger. Why? What have I done to deserve this? How do I stop this? Why do I have to be the one who sits here figuring it out? And he gets to sit there as if nothing happened. Despite her fear spilling into the bond, he remained turned from her in ambivalence. No, you don't get to just sit there.

Instinctively, she seized a droid part from the box by her bed and threw it in his direction with a cry of anger. He didn't flinch as it passed right through him. The fruit had passed across the galaxy between them, but not the droid part. What was the difference between the two instances? The intention? Or the wielder?

Resenting that the Force had responded to him and not her, she picked up another and another and propelled them at him with ferocity, watching them sail through him and strike the wall. It only served to further incense her.

“If you’re going to throw droid scraps at me, could you at least throw sensors for BB units?” he asked quietly.

If he wanted astromech sensors, she would throw every single one she had at him. "You are the worst thing that has ever happened to me!” she screamed, throwing the part at him, willing it to hurt him. It missed him but crashed into the objects on his desk sending them flying. His head followed its path of destruction before he laid his palms flat on the surface of his desk, exhaling slowly as he understood the implications – just as they had dawned on her.

The bond is getting stronger. I can affect his surroundings. That means I can hurt him. That means... I can kill him... right now.

He turned haltingly and his eyes finally met hers. She had spent the connection demanding he look at her, but she wished she hadn’t. His eyes were drowning in misery he didn’t deserve to feel. He opened his mouth to say something, but pressed his quivering lips together and swallowed it instead.

No, you don't get to look at me this way. You're the monster!
Remember Rey, every moment you are connected – every moment he is alive – your friends are at risk.

"I want the past to die!" she screamed. "I want you to die. I want all this pain to end! I want your mother to have peace so she can stop suffering! The thought of you is literally killing her!" He winced and inhaled sharply. The agony constricted through her chest again, so she searched deep for the anger that felt so much more... empowering. She struggled to breathe against the pressure, grasping more spare parts in her fury and forcing them at him. She was well aware of his extensive knowledge of manipulating objects with the force; he could easily stop the attack. It was merely comforting to imagine hurting him. The thought had never crossed her mind, however, that he wouldn’t block them.

Inexplicably, he didn’t. With his eyes fixed on hers, he allowed them to crash into him without as much as a flinch. She recoiled as a sharp pain radiated from her shoulder, the same area a droid part had just hit Kylo. She threw another, striking him in the ribs and cried out as she felt the pain, too. The realization shuddered through her.

I can feel what he feels.

Kylo stared at her with those intense, piercing eyes. The cruel words that had formed like venom in the darkness died on her lips. The world melted away. His stare was captivating her, enchanting her. The Force was an unnecessary weapon in those moments when their eyes connected; he could paralyze her with the deep ferocity of his gaze. Kylo did not have to speak; there was a fire burning behind his eyes that communicated more than his words ever could. It ignited a warmth within her that she dared not contemplate, a sense of feeling alive in ways she never had before.

He’d had that effect on her from the moment their eyes first met. Rey hated when he used those deep, captivating eyes to manipulate her; when he spoke without words, when his emotions said more than Basic ever could. It was too intimate. It made it difficult for her to react, and that was dangerous. It forced her to consider the thoughts behind the emotions that smoldered within his all-consuming stare. It forced her to consider her own as well.

Rey longed for the impenetrable wall that was Kylo's cold, cruel eyes – the eyes that shut out the galaxy with a hardened darkness that had lost all humanity. Those were the eyes of a man she could fight. Those eyes were rare in her presence, however, and never directed at her. The eyes before her were tormented and pained. Staring into them twisted a nerve deep inside her, fracturing her resolve. These were the eyes she had seen on Crait – the eyes of a broken, pleading man.

They were not the eyes of a monster, nor of a lying, manipulative creature like his master. There
was nothing evil about them. It was what had surprised her the most when he had first removed his helmet in her presence. He was just a man.

*A man who crushed your heart without a care in the galaxy.*

That thought ignited the rage that was simmering inside her. She grabbed more parts out of the box and wildly threw them at him, screaming at him, but he made no attempt to defend himself.

"Do something! You coward!" She could feel the heat radiating from her body, drawing strength from the energy around her. The anger strengthened her as it had that night on Starkiller. If she had a working lightsaber, there would be nothing he could do to stop her. She would defeat him again. But this time, she would make sure she killed him.

*But you do not have a lightsaber… because of him.*

Rey grabbed half of the broken lightsaber and threw that at him instead. "Look at what you did! Destroyed! Just like everything else you touch!" He caught it in his hand, without breaking eye contact, his eyes searching hers for something. His fierce stare penetrated through to her soul.

“Stop.”

Rey shook her head vehemently. He could tell his evil underlings what to do, but not *her*. “I wish I never left Jakku! I wish I never met Han and convinced him to help us bring Beebee-Ate to the Resistance! I wish I never met Maz! Or went into that room! I wish I never touched this!” She shouted, holding up her half of the lightsaber. “Then I would have never run into that forest and never met you!” The darkness surged inside her. It was almost… pleased with what she had said.

"Stop, Rey." His voice betrayed his calm exterior. The memory of what happened in the throne room replayed in her head at the softness of her name on his lips.

*Don't you dare call me that. You don’t deserve to say my name like that.*

The anger spread deeply, the burning fire giving way to cold. The cold numbed and suppressed the agonizing pain. It felt...satisfying, as if she had fed an insatiable hunger that she never knew she had. She felt… powerful.
Yes... the Force voice was pleased. You can end this now... Let the Force guide you... Show him how much the galaxy hates him... Free the galaxy of Kylo Ren... Prove to him that you are not weak, that you could not be seduced into compassion for a creature like him... No, you are strong, you have bested him... He is only alive because you showed him mercy... But you will not make that mistake again... He should fear you... It is the Force’s will... It is your destiny...

Rey watched his eyes widen as he sensed the transformation in her. She hoped it scared him to see her at her most powerful. The darkness pulsed through her, enveloping her senses, becoming the very oxygen she breathed. It called to her, howling against her like tempest winds, urging her to bend to its will. She closed her eyes and let it guide her.

*Kill him,* the voice whispered.

Her eyes snapped open and fell upon his lightsaber, foolishly abandoned on the desk. It called to her as if it were her own. Unseen forces were drawing her in, luring her, tempting her. To fight against them would be to rend the fibers of her very existence. Without contemplating the consequences, she reached out and summoned it to her hand. With quick reflexes, he slammed his hand down over it before it moved off the desk. She pounced for it, but his hand was swifter. Kylo jumped to his feet in a seething rage. With sharp, adept movements he lunged toward her like a thundering hurricane of raw power. The fiery red plasma of his blade was pointed at her throat before the vents had ignited in their fixed delay.

"Enough!" he shouted, his breathing ragged.

“Do it!” she screamed, unafraid in the face of the deadly weapon. It was a danger she had intimate knowledge of. Her chin was lifted in defiance, every muscle in her body rigid with the will to fight. Perhaps naïvely, she trusted the belief in her heart that he wouldn't dare hurt her. She had once hoped it was because he cared, but his rejection of her had proved otherwise. He just wanted her for her power; to teach her so she could join him to rule the galaxy. The reminder of the events in the throne room left an ache in her chest she wished the darkness could fill.

“I could never care about a man like you! No one could! You're impossible to love! So do it!”

His eyes were hard and black, his entire body vibrated in anticipation. Rey had seen a volatile Kylo on Starkiller, yet she had never seen his wrath quite like this. His emotions were tightly coiled springs that would snap if they were breathed on wrong. She had seen his propensity for violence, but she continued to provoke him. To prove *what,* she hadn't considered.
“If you won't do it, I will!” she screamed, “I will free the galaxy of a monster, and they will thank me, because everyone hates you! The galaxy hates you! Your mother hates you! I hate you!” His body was motionless, but the bond jerked as if her words physically impacted him. The emotions churning in his eyes flickered out with his lightsaber. The weapon was abandoned at his side before it slipped from his fingers to the floor.

Kylo blinked rapidly, and his stare dropped from her face. His expression was broken and wounded; his demeanor similar to the throne room when he bowed before Snoke. It wasn’t enough, however, to pierce through the thick veil of darkness.

“I don't know what terrible thing I’ve done to the Force to deserve this,” she continued, “but this bond is the deepest circle of Hell! No, I’d rather be surrounded by the fires of Chaos than this. I would let those fires reduce me to ash if I knew you'd burn with me! I would rather face death than suffer with this bond for the rest of my life! Nobody would mourn my death, but everyone would celebrate yours! So just do me and the galaxy a favor and die!”

The darkness abated as a barrier that he had carefully built around his emotions suddenly dropped and flooded the bond. He turned from her then – likely to hide the torment on his face from her – as if she couldn't feel everything through the bond. Perhaps, he didn’t know she could. Searing anguish and torment stole her breath and clawed her insides to shreds. It would have hurt less if she had been shot in the chest by a blaster.

This is the path to darkness, his voice echoed through her mind. To becoming a monster. To becoming...me.

The cadence of her heart pounded in her ears like war drums. She could hear him. The bond was growing stronger.

What happens, child, when the bond grows even stronger? It wasn’t her bondmate this time, but the voice of the Force. It was right.

The bond had become strong enough. Forcing away the torturous wave of emotions that possessed her, she searched for the anger, and resulting darkness, that gave her strength. She welcomed that fire as she tried to burn away everything else. The cold was fading, the pain was causing her body to shake.

The blaster was in her hands before she finished the thought of summoning it. She raised the
weapon with a mercilessness she never knew she possessed. It terrified her. Her arms were fatigued with emotions, she could barely lift it to aim it at his chest, but she was nothing if not determined. She ignored the trembling in her fingers while she battled her intuition. He turned his head slightly, as if to confirm something he already knew, and raised his hands in surrender. There was no fear in his eyes when he turned. Only disappointment. Or perhaps sorrow. He didn't deserve to feel sorrow, not after all he had done. She wished he had remained with his back to her; it would have been easier. "I will destroy you."

*You can kill me, but you can't destroy me any more than you already have,* his voice whispered in her mind. The anguish in his thoughts was evident. She wondered how broken he would have sounded if he had spoken those words aloud.

*If you want to be a prisoner to darkness, then do it. I won't stop you.* He didn't beg or plead with her. His eyes were daring her to pull the trigger as he waited with his arms open in invitation. It was her chance, she could end it all if she so chose, but the blaster became as heavy in her hands as her heart in her chest. Her hand faltered, dropping slightly, as she lost her resolve. She stared at his open palms and remembered their tender warmth in the hut. She remembered what he had told her, and she remembered what she had told him. Could she take his life after making that promise?

The darkness, however, wasn't finished with her.

*Kill him or he will kill them.*

The Force would not be satisfied until the blood of her enemy was spilled. Memories of the cruel words he had said on the *Supremacy,* his actions on Crait, and the Force's words of warning flowed unbidden through her mind, drowning out the pleas of her heart. The darkness wrapped her tightly in its cloak, convincing her this was her only choice. She aimed the blaster and shut her eyes.

"Rey!" She jumped, turning toward the source of the voice, which sounded as if it was shouted from kilometers away. Finn was standing in the doorway screaming. Without a moment's hesitation, he charged into the room at their enemy. Kylo made no move to challenge him and disappeared as Finn reached him. The sound and normal energy of the Force returned to the room as Finn fell through him onto the floor.

The commotion had jolted her from the dark, tearing open a floodgate to the light within her soul that was straining to escape its confines. The darkness dissipated, and in its place dawned the realization of what she had said to him. What she had almost done. The remorse twisted and constricted through her as her anger faded. Rey wasn’t certain if she felt worse that she had said those things to him, or that he had believed her. She was hurt. She wanted to hurt him. He deserved everything she had said and done, but the agony she had witnessed in his eyes cut deeper than the
words he had said to her.

Rey stood frozen, holding her blaster, tears rolling down her face. Her heart was beating wildly in her chest, and her knees trembled underneath the weight of her actions as she stared at the empty space where Kylo had been.

What would I have done if Finn –

“Finn!”

Her eyes were wide in fear when he turned to face her. "What...was that, Rey!” He demanded between breaths. "I heard... voices and I saw... Kylo Ren... standing... right here... I saw him, Rey...I saw him... and I ran in here to help you and... fell right through him... What was that!"

Rey dropped her blaster and collapsed down onto her bed quietly. “I don’t...” she hesitated, searching for a viable explanation for what he saw.

Tell him the truth... the voice convinced her.

"Tell me I’m going crazy."

Rey closed her eyes so she wouldn’t have to witness the disappointment in his. “You’re not crazy, Finn. He was here, but he wasn’t. It’s hard to explain.”

“Try me,” he said, his voice was still tremulous in fear. “After what I just saw, I’d believe a lot, Rey.”

“I didn’t want you to find out like this,” she whispered, dropping her head to her hands. “Luke says it's a Force bond. I can see him across the galaxy like he’s here, but he isn’t. It’s like a Force holoprojection – like what Luke did on Crait – only neither of us control it. This is the first time anyone else was able to see it, except for Luke. The connections started when I was with Luke on Ahch-To. It started off by just being able to see Ben from across the galaxy, but eventually I was able to touch his hand, and we shared a vision, and I thought I could turn him so I left Luke on Ahch-To, and went to Ben on the Supremacy and told him he would not bow before Snoke, and I was right! He killed Snoke, and we killed all his guards together, but then instead of helping me save you all, he asked me to join him to rule the galaxy, so I tried to grab my lightsaber, and it
exploded, and then the *Supremacy* was hit, and I was able to escape, and the rest you know. Well, now I can see him, and hear what he's thinking, and even feel what he's feeling, and see his surroundings, and hurt him! The bond is getting stronger, and I don't know what to do, because the only other person I can ask who knows anything about the Force... is Ben!” She exhaled slowly, predominantly in exhaustion, but also in fear of her friend’s response and relief that she had finally shared the burden. It felt cathartic to finally say it all aloud to her friend; still, she refused to look up at him as she awaited his answer. “Say something?”

When it finally came, it wasn’t the answer she expected. It wasn’t an answer at all. "Ben?"

"That’s… that’s all you got out of this? Yes, his real name is Ben Solo.” When she had first considered the words in her head, they hadn’t sounded so… defensive. It was a perfectly reasonable question, as *no one* in the Resistance called him Ben. Rey refused to contemplate why she was so adamant with him when she had been so uncertain herself.

"I know his real name!” he barked. “I was there when he told Han that ‘Ben’ is dead, and I believe him. His name is Kylo Ren now.”

“Trust me, I know,” she said, more sharply than she had intended. She knew Finn wasn’t the person she was angry with, and Finn seemed to come to the same conclusion about her. When he spoke again, there was a restraint that hadn’t been there before.

“You have,” he paused, brow pinched, as if the words hurt to say, “a Force connection... with the one man that wants to kill us all?”

She nodded slowly, eyes downcast.

“You were on the *Supremacy* when it was hit?”

Rey nodded again.

Movement caught her attention, and Rey watched him drag his hand down his face, pausing to clasp his jaw. “You went to him?”

"Yes," she whispered. More tears betrayed her attempts at restraint as she steeled herself for his reaction.
Finn's voice was low, heavy with emotion, but there was no trace of the anger she believed she would find there. "Why didn’t you tell me?"

"I was afraid, Finn."

He knelt down in front of her and lifted her chin, bringing her teary eyes to meet his. "Afraid of what?" He did his best to smile through tears. She didn’t deserve to have such a loyal friend like him.

"I feared that you would think differently of me. You're my best friend Finn; you're more important to me than you know. I feared what the Resistance would do; I don’t want to lose you all. And I feared what he would do..." she sniffed, wiping her tears with the back of her hand.

"I'm here for you, no matter what. You shouldn’t have faced him alone. Okay?" She knew she should tell him everything – she would tell him everything when she was ready. Just not yet. She had hardly come to terms with the reality and the capability of the bond herself.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’m so sorry, Finn.”

“I’m not mad,” he replied. “I know it’s not the same at all, but I was afraid to tell you that I wasn’t Resistance, and I was afraid to tell you about, Rose, too. I can’t blame you for feeling the same way. What if we promise – right now – no more secrets?” Unfortunately, it was more similar than Finn realized. Only, Rose wasn’t their enemy, and the woman cared for Finn in return. The other problem was she couldn’t promise that there would be no more secrets, In fact, she needed him to promise there would be.

“I need a favor, Finn, and it involves more secrets.”

He studied her pained expression for a moment before nodding. She sighed in relief before she continued. “You can’t tell anyone what you know about the bond. I want to find a way to control it first.”

“Of course,” he assured her.
She smiled. “You promise?”

“I promise.” She threw her arms around his broad shoulders and whispered, "I don’t deserve you," in his ear. He embraced her tightly and then shifted his weight back onto his heels.

“Rey, you said that these 'moments' are getting stronger. Let's use it to our advantage. You said that you can hurt him; that means you can kill him, right?” A cold chill shivered through her body.
Violence

Rey throws droid parts at Kylo to hurt him, she threatens to kill him with a blaster and he raises a lightsaber threateningly.

Some people may find this 'abusive' (though I don't know why you would if you're reading Reylo). These two are still enemies at this point of the story and they will behave like enemies. They are both trying to be the people their causes need them to be and are struggling with feelings of resentment and betrayal. Kylo is still very much entrenched in the dark side and Rey is experimenting with darkness, so this will be a theme that comes into play in later chapters. Take this into consideration before continuing.
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Kylo collapsed into his chair with a shuddering exhale. He leaned his head back and stared blankly at the ceiling. The bond was getting stronger. They could hear each other's thoughts, feel each other's emotions and sense each other's pain. They could see each other's environment, affect it, and now the people in that environment could see them, too. They could hurt each other. If the Force had not split them apart, would the traitor have been able to hurt him? If not, it wouldn't have been for a lack of trying - the valiant hero come to protect the helpless girl from the monster. His only mistake was that Rey didn't need protecting.

Kylo tried to settle the churning in his stomach, the nausea he felt whenever he saw the traitor. He had made the mistake of sparing his life twice, and all it had brought him was misery. The next time, Kylo would end that distraction permanently. Rey would hate him for it, but what did it matter? Rey hated him no matter what he did, and he shouldn’t care if she hated him.

He didn't fear losing Rey to the traitor – at least, not from the thoughts he had seen regarding their friendship. She had regarded the young man much as she had regarded Han Solo. They were the first people in her life that had been kind to her. The traitor had done terrible things for the First Order, had lied to her, had almost abandoned her, yet she forgave him. Her friendship with the traitor had given Kylo the foolish hope that maybe she could see beyond what he had done as well.

He still carried a deep hatred for the traitor, but it had little to do with Rey. It never had. He was everything Kylo was and yet everything Kylo could never be. Kylo had witnessed moments of FN-2187's follies and victories during his years in cadet training and missions for the Order. Kylo found himself irritated with the trooper more often than not. “Eight-Seven” was the one to interrupt an important meeting with Hux by releasing a creature from the surface of the planet GUHL-J03870 on the Finalizer. Though Kylo had to admit that, at the time, he found the trooper's hijinks entertaining, if only because it irritated Hux. Kylo even played along with Eight-Seven's charade of impersonating Phasma to remove that creature from the ship. He forgave the young man for forgetting he was Force-sensitive. Though he easily recognized in the Force that he was not the third member of their triumvirate command, Kylo was intrigued to see how far the trooper would continue. It was his mistake for not understanding the insubordination for what it was.

There was something about him that reminded Kylo of himself, perhaps before the Order, when he was wide-eyed and naïve to the truth of the galaxy. Regardless of his reasoning, he wasn't one to remember stormtrooper's names, but he remembered FN-2187.

Kylo was surprised to see the trooper on Taunul, struggling to complete his mission. The boy was lost, and Kylo sensed the depth of his conflict when he skimmed the thoughts in his mind. His friend had been killed in front of him, and he was questioning whether his ideals aligned with the
Order's. It was enough to have the younger man held for treason; hell, he could have redirected the beam of plasma at the trooper, and they'd have been none the wiser – but something gave Kylo pause.

Eight-Seven's thoughts centered on his abandonment by his parents, whom he was too young even to remember when was sent away. Though his parents had not abandoned him, he had been taken; Finn had been told they had willingly handed him to the First Order. Kylo knew from his file that his family had been killed, but he also knew it was the habit of the officers in charge of the stormtrooper programs to lie to the children about the circumstances of their arrival. It would not have engendered much trust if the Order told the children the truth – the Order abducted them from their parents, often murdering the families to cut any loose ends. Kylo never agreed with the program, but that had been Hux’s responsibility, not his.

Perhaps that was why – when he sensed the trooper's thoughts of neglect and abandonment by his parents as he questioned the propaganda of the Order that had been thrust upon him despite his own beliefs – Kylo understood him, as he knew that struggle all too well before he had found the Order. He sensed how the death of his friend had derailed the young man, and Kylo remembered the day he had promised himself he would forget.

Just as Kylo had struggled, Eight-Seven was at war with himself over who he was and who he was expected to be. Kylo sensed the young man's disillusionment, as he remembered his own, but he also felt the trooper's loyalty. He believed FN-2187 would make the decision Kylo hadn't had the chance to make at the Jedi temple. Kylo believed he would stay. Perhaps it was for Eight-Seven, or perhaps more for himself, but he let him go.

The traitor, however, betrayed them all. FN-2187 escaped shortly after returning from Jakku and set off a chain of events that Kylo could never have anticipated. He helped Poe escape. He found Rey and the map; the one thing Kylo needed to end his suffering. He stole the Millennium Falcon. He brought Han Solo to Starkiller. He helped Rey escape. And then, as if he hadn't done enough damage, he tried to kill Kylo with his own grandfather's lightsaber.

He had betrayed everyone, yet he had everything Kylo had ever wanted. He had been raised by the dark side, but Kylo no longer sensed conflict in him on Starkiller. He had chosen the light as if it was the easiest decision in the galaxy. No one saw him as the monster from the First Order, as they would have with Kylo. No, he had the compassion of both Kylo's mother and father, though Kylo wasn't surprised. He didn’t struggle with darkness. Why wouldn’t they prefer someone else's child over their own?

The traitor had earned the loyalty of Rey and enough trust to somehow wield the saber of the Skywalker legacy. Yes, Kylo should have killed him then. It would have been easy, even in his weakness. The trooper was trained, but not in lightsaber combat; he did not have the assistance of the Force. But like the fool that Kylo was that day, he spared his life for a second time. He could
have ended it quickly, but he left him dying in the snow to pursue his grandfather’s weapon. If the traitor died eventually of his injuries, well, then Kylo rationalized that it was his own destiny. He knew he would come to regret it, and when he saw how concerned Rey was for the traitor, he did. Kylo did not fear that his fate might lie in the young man's hands; that was Rey's place, after all, but he could further complicate the bond with Rey.

Rey.

“I have to find a way to sever this bond, for both of our sakes,” he told the droid sitting loyally next to him. The droid studied his face, then beeped curiously. “A bond is a…” How did he explain it to a droid with the mentality of a child? “A bond is when two people are tied together with an invisible string.” That didn’t satisfy the droid’s curiosity, as it questioned him with another series of tones.

“No, it doesn’t hurt,” he said. “We are not actually tied together, just our… souls.”

He thought that would be the end of it, but the droid found more questions rather than answers, asking him for definitions he had never considered. “A soul is a… it’s who you are, inside. It’s what makes you different from other BB units.”

The droid found that answer particularly interesting, its beeps louder and more enthusiastic than before.

“Of course, you have a soul,” he said, focusing on the Force Destiny schematics. “If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be afraid to die.” The response was another series of whirs and twitters.

“Well, they’re wrong.” The comment was off-hand, said in distraction as he enlarged certain aspects of the machine on his screen. There was no question in his mind that droids felt just as humans did. He’d spent enough of his life being raised by them; he knew better than anyone that there was more to droids than circuits and drives. The droid rolled forward, nearly crashing into his knee if it wasn’t for his swift reflexes. The Force stalled the droid’s progress a few centimeters away. The droid tilted his head down to rest his domed head on Kylo’s knee instead. He nudged the droid away in irritation when he responded with a ridiculous assertion.

*No droid, I am not good.*

It was the droid’s next question that drew his eyes away from the screen. The droid made it seem
like such a simple question; if it doesn’t hurt, then why did he want to end the bond? The answer was impossibly more complicated. He’d always been terrible at talking to children, even when he was a child. How was he supposed to explain circumstances he had purposefully chosen not to contemplate himself? “Because it does hurt, but not pain that can make me bleed. It’s on the inside, in my soul.”

_Ah, so the droid is an optimist_, he thought as the astromech continued down its path of naïve questioning. “No, it can’t be fixed like a real wound; she hates me.”

Kylo chewed his lip he felt the irritating sensation of tears prickling in his eyes. He was disgusted with himself. Slamming down his holopad, he pushed away from his desk and busied himself picking up the broken holobooks by the wall instead. He may have been weak, but he couldn’t allow the droid to sense that. The droid, however, was not keen to abandon his line of questioning. “Hate is… it’s when you feel many different emotions, bad emotions, toward something. It’s like being sad and mad and scared at the same time. So much that it consumes you.” He snorted when the droid expressed his hatred toward the people who threw him away. “Me, too.”

The droid was clearly naïve, but his desire to learn and understand spoke to the same nature in Kylo. He had always been curious to learn all the knowledge the universe had to offer, and much of his childhood had been spent with his nose in a book. His favorite subject, much like the droid, had always been people and their emotions, although most were more proficient at hiding them than he was. Han Solo liked to take machines apart; Kylo liked to dissect minds. He liked to pull away layers until he found the truth – until he knew exactly who that person was. He had convinced himself that if he knew a person and understood their true intentions, he would never be betrayed. He had been wrong.

It was almost as if the astromech had been following his thoughts when he chirped curiously. “No, hate is not the opposite of love,” he answered. “I think most of the hate I’ve ever felt started as love. I’d say the opposite of love is apathy.” Preemptively anticipating the droid’s next question, he continued, “Apathy is… feeling… _nothing._”

His words from the throne room echoed tortuously in his mind. _You come from nothing. You’re nothing. But not to me._

The droid beeped another question, clearly not understanding in his innocence how much the subject unbalanced Kylo. He wanted to be angry with him, but how could he be angry with what was essentially a child?

“No,” he sighed. “I want to, but I don’t feel apathy toward her. I even thought I hated her, but I don’t.”
Kylo knew what the droid’s last question would be before he asked. He was only trying to understand, after all, and if he didn’t hate her, then he knew what the droid would presume. Love. “It’s complicated – what I feel toward her. I should kill her; it would be easier if I did, but I don’t want to, and I don’t know why. She betrayed me, but I would give my life for hers if I had to choose. You tell me what that is, because your guess is as good as mine, droid.”

Her words bounced through his head as if they hadn't done enough damage the first time.

_I want the past to die! I want you to die. I want all this pain to end! I want your mother to have peace so she can stop suffering! The thought of you is literally killing her!_

_Look at what you did! Destroyed! Just like everything else you touch!_

_I could never care about a man like you! No one could! You're impossible to love!_

_I will free the galaxy of a monster, and they will thank me, because everyone hates you! The galaxy hates you! Your mother hates you! I hate you! I don’t know what terrible thing I've done to the Force to deserve this, but this bond is the deepest circle of Hell! No, I'd rather be surrounded by the fires of Chaos than this. I would let those fires reduce me to ash if I knew you'd burn with me! I would rather face death than suffer with this bond for the rest of my life! Nobody would mourn my death, but everyone would celebrate yours! So just do me and the galaxy a favor and die!_

The words were just that, words; but they tore through him like plasma. He didn’t know why he was so weak that he allowed the cruel words of everyone he ever cared about to hurt him like this, but every time they broke him down, the darkness fed off his pain, numbing him, and the monster returned.

Her words were not the part that concerned him the most. It was the cold hate in her eyes. He had seen it before, but not in her. The hate reflected back at him every time he stared in the mirror. He had felt the darkness flow through her, and it terrified him. He had known that daily torture of the darkness. It wasn’t until he had seen it in her that he realized how profoundly he did not want her to fall. She was too good. It would consume her and strip away all that was different about her.

“If I knew how to sever this bond, I would. The only one who knew how is dead... and might be back inside my head soon enough,” he said, though he wasn’t certain he was speaking to the droid.
anymore. The droid nudged his knee in reassurance, promising that no matter what happened, he would "help" Kylo. Unfortunately, if his former master returned, he would kill the apprentice that failed him. There wasn’t much the droid could do to help when he was dead. Only, what if there was?

“Can you… download everything on this datapad?” The droid seemed enthusiastic to be able to help as it set to the task. As the astromech sat next to him, whirring while it downloaded the information from the device, he reopened the schematic plans on his holopad. **FORCE DESTINY**, it read.

It would require the body of a Force-sensitive and an object imbued with Snoke’s… Sidious’ life force to reincarnate him through the machine. Kylo knew his master wore a ring, made from obsidian from Vader’s castle. It was engraved with the Four Sages of Dwartii. Palpatine kept bronze statues of the four in his office and chambers. It only made sense that he would have also had a ring made in their honor as Snoke. Why hadn’t Kylo seen the connection before?

Snoke had spoken so highly of his grandfather, but it was Vader who had succumbed to sentiment, it was Vader who had betrayed him. That was why Snoke had found him so young, he realized, to turn him before he could build strong bonds with his own family – not that it would have made much difference; his family had no interest in forming any kind of bond with him. Either way, Snoke had gotten what he wanted. Until Rey, that is.

His master had been the most formidable force in the galaxy, but the compassion for Rey he sensed in Kylo on Starkiller and his understanding of her loneliness, terrified him. Snoke knew after Han’s death that he questioned his loyalty to the Supreme Leader, enough that he purposefully created the bond with the intent to use Kylo’s weakness against him. Snoke’s betrayal of Kylo’s trust was less about his apprentice failing to become the new Vader and more fear that he would be. He must have implanted those visions to draw her to the Supremacy, he reasoned, so his master could order Kylo to kill her, and, ironically, forced him to follow the same path as his grandfather.

What he couldn't quite understand was that he had seen holographs of the Emperor, and the creature he cut in half was not Sidious’s body. That left him with one terribly concerning question – who was Snoke before Sidious stole his life? Was it a body Sidious had found, or was the creature who once was Snoke a creature with a story of his own, alive when he went into that machine? Had he known Sidious? Had he given his life willingly? Or had he been a rival?

The Emperor had died nearly two decades before Kylo had joined Snoke, but the creature had been in his head his entire life, and Kylo had met him as a child. That begged the question of exactly when Sidious had taken his new form. Who had helped him? Someone else had to operate that machine; that meant someone else knew of its power. Other than Hux, of course. How did Hux, of all people, know of this machine? His father Brendol? Or did Sidious's distrust in Kylo run deeper than he knew? Would Sidious trust Hux with his life? Most disturbing of all, it suggested that
another machine had been created and was, in all likelihood, still out there.

Kylo shuddered at the thought.

It was beyond his knowledge of the dark side, it was far beyond his knowledge of the Sith. He was no Sith and never aspired to be one, having no desire to pledge loyalty to another ancient hypocritically indoctrinated religion. Neither was Snoke, or so he had been led to believe, but Sidious had been. Why had he shied away from those teachings when he trained the knights? Did it have anything to do with what happened to his grandfather? Was that why the equal propensity toward the darkness and light inside him had originally appealed to Snoke?

No, Snoke would have told him; he was his apprentice, his second-in-command. Hux had to be wrong. Snoke couldn't have been Sidious. At the very least, Luke would have known. He was there when the Emperor died. He had to have known his energy in the Force. He would have told his own nephew, wouldn't he? Kylo couldn't quiet the suspicion that he wouldn't have, just as he never told him about his own grandfather. Perhaps, it did make sense. Snoke did have an obsession with Luke that he never understood, a past he wouldn't speak of. Perhaps his desire for the Skywalkers to die, his need for a descendant of Skywalker to do it, originated not from a fear of a new Jedi Order, but of Luke Skywalker himself. His obsession was more personal than strategical, since it was Luke Skywalker who had turned his own apprentice against him.

Darth Plagueis wrote *The Science of Creating Life*, the only book in the galaxy that could have been used to create this machine, and Sidious was his apprentice. Sidious could have taken the book when he killed his master. It was all beginning to make sense. He should have made the connection sooner. Luke was in possession of that book, hidden away with his father's possessions. There was only one likely way he came into possession of that book: Luke or Vader must have recovered it after killing the Emperor. Kylo had seen it at Luke's Jedi temple. He had read every word of that journal... Luke had grown angry when he had discovered it, warned him of its dark powers, claimed no one should ever lay eyes on it. He wouldn't have willingly given the information to the First Order. Of course, how could he have been so blind? If that machine was recreated without the assistance of that book, then it required the knowledge of the person who wrote it, or the apprentice he had shared it with.


How could he have been so foolish? Snoke was once Palpatine, who had become Darth Sidious. That only left one question – What would he do now?

The droid chirped that he had finished, ejecting the datacard from his drive. Kylo could only focus on the blurring screen.
If he comes back, he will kill me. Or worse. He will kill her and keep me prisoner in my own mind forever. I can’t. I’m not strong enough. I would rather die than let Snoke...Sidious invade my mind again. I can’t destroy it, but I’ll find a way to stop it if it’s the last thing I do.

Another thought surfaced through the dark thoughts. *What if I can use it? If it can bring back Sidious...*
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“Maz!” Poe smiled as her distorted, flickering image materialized on the dated portable holo.

“Young Dameron,” she intoned warmly, adjusting the lenses on her goggles. “I trust you all are making yourselves scarce.”

“That bad, huh?” He smiled confidently, though he suspected she could see right through the pretense.

“I might as well not sugar coat it,” she sighed, manipulating the datapad in her hand. “The bounties read as follows...”

“There is still a five hundred thousand credit bounty on your head for various crimes against the First Order, including holding high command in a radical insurgency, concealing critical government intel, destruction of First Order property, escape from imprisonment, theft of First Order property and murder of First Order personnel. Considered armed and dangerous. Kill on sight....”

Poe chuckled as she read the list, reminiscing over each "crime" he had committed to earn each charge.

“There is a new bounty of five hundred thousand credits,” she continued, “on Rose Tico’s head for various crimes against the First Order including trespassing aboard a Mega-class Star Dreadnought, impersonating an officer, assault on an officer, escape from imprisonment, theft of First Order property and murder of First Order personnel. Considered armed and dangerous. Kill on sight.”

Poe was not surprised after their infiltration of the Supremacy.

“There is a new bounty of one and a half million credits on Finn’s head,” Poe whistled in admiration at the price of the bounty on his friend, “for various crimes against the First Order including trespassing aboard a Mega-class Star Dreadnought, impersonating an officer, assault on an officer, escape from imprisonment, theft of First Order property, desertion from First Order ranks, treason, and murder of First Order personnel. Considered armed and dangerous. Kill on
sight.”

“The price of Leia’s bounty has remained unchanged at two and a half million credits for various crimes against the First Order, including holding high command in a radical insurgency, instrumenting destruction and disorder against First Order property and associates, and unreported crimes against the Supreme Leader. Considered armed and dangerous. The curious addition is that her bounty has been changed to ‘Capture only...’”

It made no sense to Poe that her bounty would be changed. Kylo Ren had done everything in his power to murder his mother; why would he change her bounty to ‘capture only’ unless... unless he wanted to kill her himself.

“And this is the most interesting one,” Maz continued, adjusting her goggles. “A new bounty of a whopping five million credits on your future Jedi for various crimes against the First Order, including trespassing aboard a Mega-class Star Dreadnought, escape from imprisonment, theft of First Order property, murder of First Order personnel, assault on Supreme Leader Kylo Ren, and the assassination of former Supreme Leader Snoke. Considered armed, dangerous and Force-sensitive. She is also ‘Capture only,’ which I find quite intriguing considering her crimes.”

“Did you say assassination of Supreme Leader Snoke?” Poe asked confoundedly. As far as anyone knew, Rey joined the Resistance on Crait straight from Ahch-To. The claims by the First Order must have been wrong, only his intuition told him otherwise. Maz added to his suspicion with a smirk. “Let me get this straight,” he said. “She found a way to sneak onto a dreadnought, which we could only accomplish with a code breaker. Then she avoided encountering Finn and Rose, killed the most powerful and protected creature in the galaxy, and escaped from Kylo Ren a second time, completely unscathed?”

“Those, my dear boy, are questions I do not have adequate answers for,” she answered. “They are best saved for young Rey, though you must prepare yourself for answers you may not want to hear.”

“Any other news?” he asked hoarsely. His mind was still reeling over the revelation about Rey. Something didn’t sit quite right with him about what had happened between Kylo Ren and Rey in the interrogation room. Why hadn’t Kylo immediately tortured her for the map? His intuition told him that whatever it was, it was worth further investigation.

“There is one more bounty. Ten million credits for the delivery or whereabouts of the Millennium Falcon,” she said delicately, anticipating a discouraged reaction. “I hope you’re comfortable; as long as the highest-paid bounty in the galaxy is on that ship, you can’t leave whatever planet you’re on.”
“Maz, we’ll have to take our chances; we need supplies,” he argued.

“No, that may not be necessary.” A wry smile grew on Maz’s face, which in turn elicited a smirk on his. “I have an idea that may provide you the supplies you need and arouse less attention than the Falcon.”

“I’m listening.”
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See the end of the chapter for more notes
Kylo had the droid hoisted onto a metal bench in one of the seemingly infinite maintenance rooms on the destroyer, with a BB series astromech droid manual open on his holopad so he could fix the droid's sensor. He had plenty of practice tinkering on his parent's droids – more often disabling them so he could sneak away – but the astromech series was an enigma to him. He hadn't worked on one in years, and the memories of the last time he had were not welcome. The droid was busy chatting away, clearly not disquieted by his mask as the others were. The astromech probably thought his voice sounded more like a droid through his modulator, or he didn’t understand the
intimidation tactics of humans. Either way, he never looked at Kylo like a monster. Kylo had forgotten how greatly he preferred droids to the human variety.

Kylo was thankful the droid couldn’t sense his emotions. He had witnessed his earlier outburst, when Kylo broke yet another holopad, and had said nothing. He took the droid for a walk and found himself in the maintenance room. It was better than thinking about what he had discovered about Force Destiny. The machine could not simply reanimate a person; it would require sacrifice and their lifeforce. It wasn’t that he would have to exchange his own life that concerned him. The transfer would require a lifeforce or an object imbued with one’s dark essence, which was something he didn’t have.

I was foolish to hope the machine could bring him back. It’s too late.

His spiraling thoughts were broken by the hiss of the blast door as Hux stormed into the room. “Supreme Leader.”

“Every time you walk into a room, I get an immediate desire to be… anywhere else.”

“Ah, yes,” Hux said, swallowing his displeasure. “And yet, here I am.”

“How did you find me?”

Hux’s face pinched in disgust for daring to ask such a preposterous question. “Your belt has a tracking beacon. You do remember how you were rescued from Starkiller, don’t you? And we have cameras everywhere on this ship, as well as logs for your code cylinders. That is how I know, for instance, that you’ve paid a visit to the construction of the Force Destiny twice in as many days. You would think with all of those wizard powers you would –”

Kylo turned to face the general. “Do you have an objection to my oversight of this project?”

“Why would I?” Hux smiled, but his eyes were narrowed in distrust. “Despite your propensity to destroy important pieces of equipment, I’m not concerned. There is another functional machine if something… unfortunate were to happen. And, according to the instructions, the location of that machine is in the hands of your second-in-command. Curious it wasn’t entrusted to you, isn’t it?”

Kylo ignored the slight, hoping Hux would quickly tire of irritating him.
“How thorough, General.” It was just as he feared; destroying the machine would not be simple. He was grateful his knights knew the location of the other machine, though he found it odd that none of them had mentioned it. Hux leaned sideways to stare around Kylo, clearly suspicious of what he had been up to. When he noticed the droid, Kylo shifted, blocking his line of sight. “Is that all?” The general rolled his eyes but adjusted his focus back to his superior.

“Of course not, Supreme Leader,” Hux said, the glint in his eyes revealing that Kylo would likely not be enthusiastic about the words that followed. “We have collected a group of rebels who responded to the plea from the Resistance we intercepted on Crait. Sympathizers, it seems. What is your order?”

Why does this feel like a trap?

“Execution, of course.” Kylo was thankful for the mask obscuring his face as he grimaced in response. The astromech droid beeped in confusion, and Kylo couldn't bring himself to explain his actions. The droid was naïve; what could he understand of the unfortunate necessities of war?

Hux’s smile widened. “It would fortify the respect of the troops for our new Supreme Leader if you were to complete the execution yourself, especially after your disappointment on Crait.”

It was an act Kylo would never have hesitated to fulfill when it had been an order, when there was someone else who held the key to his destiny – or so he once believed. When all he wanted was to become his grandfather. He had vanquished entire armies, killed the "unkillable," stared death in the face and laughed. Now, the thought of terminating a life that wasn't an immediate threat to his own felt abhorrent, like struggling against a strong current when everything inside him was screaming to turn around. He knew whose face he would see as he took their lives.

Kylo was overwhelmed with a feeling of being out of place, a wrongness that vibrated with every echo of the order in his head. Even the scars on his own hands were foreign to him, as if he had been transported into a body in someone else's life. Hux was waiting for an answer expectantly, but Kylo suddenly couldn't breathe, the mask his only protection as his mind unraveled. If he had everything he had ever wanted, why did he feel so lost?

“Supreme Leader?”

Kylo was faced with a terrifying truth – he didn't know what he wanted anymore. He didn't know who he was anymore. It was the same terror he had faced on his knees on Crait, but this time he
had no one to blame for it. Despite the mask, he refused to meet Hux's impatient glare. "Give me an hour."

Satisfied, Hux exited back through the blast door, screaming orders and castigation to passing personnel, leaving Kylo alone with the droid. The droid beeped at him cautiously, and Kylo hated that after what he had overheard, he still expressed concern for him, still called him his master.

“I'll fix you,” Kylo said softly, “But then you should find someone else to be your master. I'm not...” He hesitated, fumbling to adequately explain it to the childlike droid. “I'm not a good man.”
Chapter End Notes

Mention of violence

Hux mentions execution
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Finn was hopelessly lost in thought, chewing his lip anxiously as he studied the intricate carvings on the ceiling of the ancient temple. Rose had warned him that Rey would come back different from Jedi training. And she had, but when she embraced him as if no time had passed, it seemed like a good different. She had appeared hopeful, confident, and lighthearted; everything a new Jedi should be.

Every moment spent observing her since, however, convinced him otherwise. There was a... shadow eclipsing her personality, something sinister tormenting her. It tormented him in turn. At first, he had believed his new relationship with Rose – which he hadn’t had time to explore since she’d awoken– had been affecting Rey. He had seen the truth, however, when he came face to face with the Force apparition of the monster himself, Kylo Ren, in her room with her. The thought of that creature anywhere near Rey sickened him. The creature was changing her, draining the brightness right out of her, and she seemed oblivious to it. He only hoped that now that he knew, he could help her.

“Finn!” The voice echoed off the wall of the vast underground hall. His stomach fluttered as he pivoted in search of the owner of that voice, knowing exactly whose eyes would meet his.

“Rose...” He said breathlessly, taking in how refreshed and alive she looked. Her wounds were healing well, and there was color to her cheeks again. Guilt rose like bile in his throat. He had stood vigil by her bed until she had awoken just before they landed on Barkhesh, but he had been actively avoiding her ever since. He scrambled to her side and guided her to a nearby altar. “You shouldn't be walking around like this. Do you feel dizzy?”

“I'm perfectly fine, thanks to you.” Finn helped her down onto the stone altar. He couldn’t help the thrill that shot through him when she grasped his hand for leverage. She smiled warmly up at him, making the whole galaxy disappear around them. Something reassuring in her eyes and smile made his fears melt away, which made him feel like wherever he was, as long as he was with her, he was right where he was supposed to be. They may not have understood each other right away, but once they did, there was an easiness – an intimacy – that he had never felt before. He almost forgot the war and the consequences they faced. Then he noticed the wound on her forehead. The galaxy might have seemed like it disappeared when he looked into her eyes, but it didn’t, and that was the problem. Her smile faltered as she stared at him. Maybe it was the way he stiffened, or the fear that crossed his face, or the hesitant step he took away from her. He knew they had to have a conversation, but he wasn’t ready for it. “Finn?”

“I'm sorry; I'm just... tired.” It was a lie, but how could he explain the truth? Shrugging out of his jacket, he sank onto the stone altar next to her and wrapped the jacket around her. It was just a
jacket and just the gentlemanly thing to do, but the hair on his arms bristled with pride in seeing her wear it.

“Thank you, for everything you did to me... for me,” she huffed, smiling in chagrin. It was almost enough to thaw the cold hopelessness in his heart. He leaned forward, resting his elbows stiffly on his knees. His eyes were downcast as he stared at his clasped hands, trying to find the words to say. Han had told him that women always discovered the truth, but it never made it any easier to say. He refused to meet her gaze, terrified of what he would see in her eyes – and what she would see in return.

“It was... of course... I should be the one thanking you,” he muttered.

“Well, I couldn't let you die.” The words were spoken casually, but the near consequences of Crait were heavy in his mind. If he had died a martyr for a cause finally worth fighting for, then so be it, but he could not accept that she almost died. For him. How would he have lived with that?

“I don't know why you did that... for someone like me.” His voice exposed more of his inner conflict than he had hoped. He craved to see the emotions in her eyes, the softness of her expression, the reassurance of her smile that would prove to him that everything would be okay. He needed her to vow that his fears were unfounded, that it would be different next time. The others had let him go; they had allowed him to make the sacrifice to save them all. He needed her to promise that she wouldn’t die – especially not for him – but he knew it would be a comforting lie. They were at war.

“I told you why I saved you,” she replied quietly. Rose had watched her sister die for the Resistance. For a dreadnaught. Though Rose had followed unquestioningly to join the cause, she hadn’t joined the fight, not until him. If they had never met, she wouldn’t have gone on that mission, and she wouldn’t have nearly died. It was his fault, and he didn’t know what he would have done if she hadn’t been strong enough to survive. Maybe she believed she had found someone worth dying for in him, but that was what terrified him the most. He refused to lose someone he... cared for. Never again. Clearing his throat, he searched for the right words. He knew what she wanted him to say, but he knew what that would do to them both.

With another quick glimpse into her hopeful eyes, his resolve dwindled to a thread. “You look better,” he said as he cracked his knuckles restlessly. It was a change of subject, but he wasn’t ready to tell her the truth, and he hoped she would follow without objection.

“I feel good. Much better,” she answered brightly, but he could hear the disappointment in her voice. “Though my ego is a little bruised.”
“Is it the hair? You couldn’t do it, obviously, so I wanted to help. In my defense, I never did anyone’s hair before, but Rey said it looked okay,” he joked, chancing another glance at her face. He knew it would be a mistake. His chest tightened at the sweet smile that brightened her trusting eyes.

“No, no, no, the hair looks great,” she assured him as she ran her fingers through the crooked ponytail. “I was talking about the part where I confessed my love for you, kissed you, then never got an answer. In your defense, I was in a coma.”

“Oh, that,” he huffed nervously, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. Rose wanted an answer – an affirmation of his reciprocated feelings or a rejection. Unfortunately, it wasn’t that simple. It didn’t matter what he felt, only what was best. Finn wouldn’t lie to her, but he couldn’t tell her the truth, either, so he attempted in vain to think of something, anything, to say to her. By the dejection stealing the brightness from her face, he knew everything he didn’t say spoke volumes. There was a heaviness in the air between them as the silence stretched uncomfortably, the sound of their uneasy breathing was deafening. He cringed when a single tear parted her cheek. This wasn’t what he wanted; he was just trying to protect her.

“This wasn’t how I imagined this going,” she chuckled, though there was no mirth behind her words. He shut his eyes tightly, chastising himself for hurting her.

“I’m sor –”

“No, no don’t apologize, Finn,” she said quickly. “Not about how you feel.”

But he did need to say something, because he couldn’t let her leave believing that he felt nothing. “Rose...”

“Yes?” she asked, a sliver of hope still shining in her eyes.

He sighed, trying to find the strength, but knowing he couldn’t bring himself to finish his thought. It just felt wrong. Everything in him wanted to hold her and never let her go. His heart screamed for him to tell her the truth. Part of him knew he was running away again, but this wasn’t to protect himself. It was to protect her.

“Rose, what do you think of Barkhesh?” he asked instead, cursing himself for allowing his fear to control him. How did protecting her make him feel more cowardice than when he almost left Rey
on Takodana? Rose could have walked away from him; he would have deserved it. Being the beautiful woman, inside and out, that he had fallen for, however, Rose smiled instead. It was wan, he could nearly *feel* her disappointment, but it was a smile, nonetheless.

“I haven’t seen much of it, yet.” She looked away from him, finding that inner strength that he admired so much about her. He thought maybe it would be easier to lie, to break her heart. She would overcome it quickly, because she was strong. If it wouldn’t break his own heart, he might have had the strength to do it. Finn had never felt like this about anyone before; it would hurt to lose her completely from his life. Not as profoundly as if he confessed his feelings and lost her, but enough to hold his tongue. His traitorous lips spoke before his rational brain could stop him.

“Tomorrow, let’s go for a walk through the jungle. I’ll show you Barkesh. I’ve been here before.”

“Really? I’d like that.” She yawned, pulling her legs into her chest so she could rest her head on her knees. They sat that way in companionable silence for a while, staring at the intricate artwork of the hall. Finn’s thoughts were everything but silent, however. There was a war inside him that rivaled the one raging outside those walls. He wished the consequences were as simple as his feelings for her, but he knew there would be no easy answers in that complicated place they found themselves. Everything about the First Order had been wrong, but the galaxy outside its structure and rules was terrifying. Consequential decisions made from necessity and survival were simple, but everything else he had to learn on his own.

Finn had become so comfortable with her presence, he had almost forgotten she was still there with him until she whispered into the space between them, “Tomorrow, just you and me.” Before he could answer, Finn felt her weight shift as her breathing grew deep and steady, and her head fell to his shoulder. As she leaned against him, he found there was no place he would rather be.

“Just you and me,” he breathed.
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“General?” Poe asked as he stood respectfully in the archway of her room, pushing aside the blanket they had fashioned into a makeshift door.

“Tell me good news, Colonel,” she answered, beckoning him into the room and patting the space next to her on her makeshift bed. Leia knew she should be lying down, resting to regain her strength, but she also knew the Resistance did not have time for that. She would be what the Resistance needed for as long as she could, health be damned.

“Well, I have some good news and some bad news,” he sighed, laying his hand over hers. She liked Poe Dameron; no matter what he did, his heart was in the right place. His parents were Resistance heroes; he was born to fight for what was right and good in the galaxy. His mother would be proud of who he had become.

“Go ahead, get on with it,” she said, both for the subject at hand and her own preservation, before her thoughts wandered into thoughts of her own family. He smiled appreciatively. She knew the young man had as much patience for pleasantries and equivocating as she did. He would make a fine leader one day.

“The base was destroyed,” he said categorically, slipping into his military persona with ease, “along with any supplies or rations. We were able to locate the command center and remove only the portable equipment as instructed. We set up a temporary command center in the main hall. The comm systems were enabled, and I contacted Maz Kanata for information on the bounties. It is as you feared, General; the Millennium Falcon is currently the highest-paid bounty available from the First Order. Until there are more targets other than that ship on every bounty hunter’s radar in the galaxy, or our allies decide to finally help us, we can’t leave this planet. We won’t make it out of the Seitia sector. We are trapped here without reinforcements. But Maz has a plan. I’ll explain it to everyone if you can make it to the command center at thirteen hundred standard hours.”

Leia smiled privately to herself. Maz had a plan for everything, as if she saw things no one could. Leia suspected she did. She would be a fool to underestimate a plan contrived by the Pirate Queen. There was hope. “Any new bounties?” she asked, knowing the answer.

“There are still active bounties for you and me. Mine is five hundred thousand credits, and yours is two and a half million credits. Your...” he paused, his stare falling to the floor. “Kylo Ren is confirmed the new Supreme Leader, and he has ensured we cannot show our faces on a single core planet, or any populated one for that matter. There is a new bounty of five hundred thousand credits on Rose for her escape from the Supremacy. Finn has a bounty of one and a half million
credits for a long list of crimes including ‘defection’ and ‘high treason.’ And the last Jedi has a new bounty of her own. Her bounty, a whopping five million credits for – get this General – ‘the assassination of Supreme Leader Snoke’.” There was more information in his eyes, a suspicion perhaps, but he swallowed it.

“Rey?” Leia wondered aloud. “Was on the Supremacy? How could that be?” There was something inside her, however, that knew it made more sense than she let on. She had been intrigued by what had happened to Rey on that island. She had seen the broken lightsaber in her hand and listened to the young woman’s fears of "Kylo Ren,” not Snoke, seizing control over the galaxy. It was a strange fear for a woman who hadn’t seen him since she cut him down on Starkiller.

Then there was the disappointment and jilted betrayal that clouded Rey’s energy in the Force, and a grief that was difficult to place. Leia had believed that her brother was to blame. What had aroused her curiosity the most, however, was that she felt those same emotions in the Force from her son. He had chosen not to kill her on the Raddus, but she had felt his intent on Crait. Luke had stopped her boy from murdering them all. Perhaps, Rey had been disappointed by Luke, and her son had felt disappointed by Snoke, or his uncle, or his failure to kill his own mother on Crait as the new Supreme Leader, but what if it wasn’t a coincidence? What if it what he had told her wasn’t a dream? If Rey had been on the Supremacy, why did she go there, what had happened to Snoke, but more importantly, what had happened between Rey and her son?

“That... is the five million credit question,” Poe said quietly, interrupting her thoughts. “I think there’s much more to Rey than any of us anticipated.” Leia nodded. The youngest Dameron had no idea how right he was. Leia only hoped it unfolded the way she imagined it could.

“I’ll talk to her,” she promised. “And any news from our 'friend'?”

Hands on his hips, Poe scuffed his shoes on the temple floor petulantly, making his disdain known. Leia was as averse to the idea as he was, but the Resistance was in desperate need of an ally, even an untrustworthy one. “I had planned to pay him a visit, but with the bounties, it looks like I'll be making that holocall.”
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Kylo marched rigidly past the rows of stormtroopers who stood at attention in deference to him. It was unnerving, sensing all the eyes watching him, judging him. Did they notice the tremor in his knees? The quickness of his breath? Were his shoulders too hunched? Were his robes disorderly in
his haste to leave his quarters? Did his gait exude power… or fear?

_You're just a child in a mask…_ echoed mockingly in his head.

He coiled the energy tightly around himself, so he wouldn’t be tempted to reach out and hear the thousands of thoughts polluting the Force at once. He knew what they were thinking about him. He knew they found him wanting. No matter what side he sacrificed for, he was never strong enough. They could see all his weaknesses; he knew they could. Kylo reminded himself that he had faced _Luke Skywalker_ and survived; he could do this. He could do _anything._

His general was standing beside the prisoners, who had been thrown to their knees in preparation for the execution. Kylo swallowed thickly under the weight of the emotions colliding inside him like a thunderstorm. His lightsaber hilt burned his back with intention; the Force was heavy with anticipation. The prisoners bowed their heads in resignation. His boots swiftly drew him nearer, though everything inside him was screaming to run away. _It's not too late_, the Force suggested in moments of weakness, _this could be the choice that changes it all._ He shut the light out as best he could, refusing to listen to its _lies._

His reluctant steps reminded him of those he’d taken a long time ago, at a burning temple. The splash of boots through muddy puddles in his memories were just as ominous as the echoes across the onyx floor of the hangar. The prisoners did not look up as he approached, but they undoubtedly noticed his boots as he stood before them – the harbinger of death. If Hux obtained the right information, Kylo would be on his knees in front of the Order facing an identical deliverance as those prisoners. He imagined it then – kneeling beside them. It was less agonizing imagining himself facing his own fate than being the executor of theirs. When the time came, Hux would undoubtedly ask him for his last words, but Kylo would never provide him the satisfaction of a single sound.

The prisoners were not begging him for amnesty, either. He respected that. They likely understood it was an exercise in futility – the disciplinary methods of the First Order were well-known – and they decided to preserve what dignity they had left. As Hux spouted his propaganda to the troops, Kylo finally let his eyes study the prisoners whose lives he would end with his weapon. Unlike what he had done in his own moments of reckoning, when he had fought monsters and the Force to control his own destiny, they each refused to stare in the face of death. Perhaps that was why he was still breathing. They wouldn’t be so lucky.

There were three; a large human male, a Duros male, and a human female. Her head was bowed so all he could see was her shoulder-length brown hair, and though Kylo had only seen Rey’s hair down in the hut and in the throne room, he remembered the soft waves and the way it bounced when she moved. As this woman before him turned her head to the side to look at another prisoner, her chestnut waves bounced around her shoulders, and his breath caught in his throat. The similarities she shared with _Rey_ were undeniable… and unnerving.
Slim framed, muscular, tall, skin tanned from the sun – it could have been her. Logically, he knew it wasn’t. He would have felt her the second she was in the same system as the Finalizer. That knowledge didn’t deter the nausea rising to his throat, however, because it easily could have been her. And if it had been her, he would have been forced to do the same to her. Ben! He forced the thought of Rey on her knees in the throne room – eyes pleading with him to save her – from his mind.

The Force was screaming inside him, and it hurt. He considered attempting to kill everyone in that place until it was silenced, either by every single one of their deaths… or his own. Realistically, he figured a division or two would fall before they killed him. Considering it with the same indifference as he weighed what to eat at mess, he decided there were undoubtedly less satisfying ways to die, but the droid back in his chambers depended on him. Kylo couldn’t leave him alone with the very people who had tried to murder him.

*Let’s get this over with.*

“General… the charges,” he said curtly. The mask removed all the conflicted emotions from his voice.

Kylo was a hurricane of emotions, but Hux was the picture of poise and detachment as he read their charges. “For the charge of inciting, assisting, or engaging in any rebellion or insurrection against the authority of the First Order or the laws thereof, you are hereby found guilty.”

“For the charge of conspiracy to defeat, destroy by force, or overthrow the First Order, you are hereby found guilty.

“For the charge of levying war against the First Order, opposing by force the authority thereof, or otherwise preventing, hindering, or delaying the execution of any law of the First Order, you are hereby found guilty.

“For the charge of seizing, stealing, or otherwise possessing any property of the First Order contrary to the authority thereof, you are hereby found guilty.

“For the charge of recruiting soldiers to engage in armed hostility against the First Order, or enlisting and engaging against the First Order military, or any place subject to the jurisdiction thereof, with intent to serve in armed hostility against the First Order, you are hereby found guilty.
“For the above charges of treason and sedition as defined in totality or partiality as levying war against the First Order, adhering to our enemies, providing aid and comfort, or otherwise participating in a rebellion, it is judgment of this court in the manner prescribed by law that the defendants are hereby sentenced to the penalty of death.”

The prisoners had not reacted to the charges, the judgment, or the sentence; they knew why the general had gathered them all there. The First Order, by law, did not imprison or provide quarter to anarchists. The orders had and always would be "kill on sight." Only those who could be tortured for information or used for morale purposes in public execution would be taken prisoner. If Kylo had found these anarchists, he would have killed them immediately. Imprisonment aboard a First Order destroyer was worse than death.

“In place of the customary firing squad, it has been determined by the court to perform this execution by lightsaber. It is the intention of this court to carry out the mandatory sentence forthwith,” Hux announced, placing his hands behind his back. He nodded once at Kylo.

Kylo closed his eyes, desperate for the strength of the darkness. Releasing himself to its control, he felt the cold spread from his fingertips inward, until he was numb to the twisting guilt in his gut and the incessant call from the light. Removing the hilt from its fastening, Kylo shifted the weight of the weapon in his fingers. Though he was still loath to follow through with what he knew must be done, he did not hesitate to ignite it. With a flash, the crimson hue of his blade flared over the prisoners.

The woman was crying softly, her head turned toward the human next to her. His head was likewise turned toward her, and Kylo didn’t have to skim their minds to feel the love between them in the Force. Everything in him screamed to comfort her, to hold her, to assure her that it would be alright. It wouldn’t be, however. There was no hope for her; her last breath would be taken with the shadow of a monster looming over her. Her only comfort was that the image of her lover would be her last. She would die. The pain of mortality would end, and she would become another ghost to haunt him in his dreams.

He would make it swift, cutting in a downward arc to sever the spinal column first. It was an even swifter method than through the heart; and less painful. The small kindness would mean little to them in the face of what he would take from them, but they had left him no choice. They had chosen a path of recalcitrance. Treason and sedition carried the penalty of death the galaxy over. If the Order discovered what he did to Snoke, or he was captured by the Resistance, he would assuredly face the same fate. What kind of order could he bring to civilizations if he did not follow the letter of the law?

His rationalizations gave him little comfort as his eyes fixated on the freckles dappled on the
woman’s shoulders. He could remind himself that she wasn’t Rey all he wanted, but his mind wouldn’t let it go. He had no doubt it would be her face he saw in his nightmares. If she were there, this was what he would be forced to do to her. If she didn’t kill him first, this was the moment he would one day face. He reminded himself that he had endured the delusion of taking her life before and persevered, and he could do it again. Grasping tightly to that thought, he readied his blade.

I’m sorry.

Kylo executed her first, so she wouldn’t feel the fear of anticipation or bear witness to the death of her lover. With a quick flourish of his blade, her cries were silenced. It was swift enough that she didn’t have time to know it was coming.

Her lover, who had been quiet until then, began openly sobbing as her body hit the floor. No, it wasn’t sobbing; it was something primal and inhuman – or was perhaps devastatingly human – something borne from a fractured soul. It was a sound that was felt in the soul of anyone who heard it, connecting them all in a unique moment of humanity. Kylo understood; his own cries of despair haunted his nightmares, reminding him of the night that changed everything, the night that inevitably led to this very moment. Kylo clenched his jaw as he withheld the sob building in his own throat.

He drew in more darkness to give him the strength to continue, and within two strides he had reached the woman’s lover. Without hesitation, he brought the lightsaber down in a clean arc, ending the man’s suffering quickly. The Doros male looked up at him as he approached. A smile spread over his face as the blade cut through the air and into him. Kylo knew he would always remember that smile.

In an instant, Kylo felt heavier, as if he had taken upon his shoulders the weight of their souls. Some souls weighed more heavily on him than others, but these would bear great weight because they had not fought back. It was a necessity, but it was one that would come at a cost to him as well.

Two hundred and eighty-seven.

That was not the number of lives he was responsible for, but the lives that had fallen by his hand. Most of the lives were taken in battles in the Unknown Regions, many other were taken at Snoke’s command. It was the number of lives that he carried every day with him. There were seven that would haunt him the most. Six were from the Jedi academy, one of whom had been taken by his choices, not his hands, but which haunted him every night all the same. None haunted him as profoundly as the one from a skyway on Starkiller. These lives would join the ranks of the fallen he had delivered to their own peace while sacrificing his own.
“Shall I add their ashes to your collection, my lord?” Hux said as he walked past, speaking of the hollow pillar containing the ashes of his enemies that he placed his grandfather’s helmet upon like a sacrificial altar.

Kylo nodded, refusing to watch when the troopers began gathering the heads and dragging the bodies away. As he glanced up to the corridor that held his escape to his quarters – to a droid who would be fiercely disappointed in him – he saw her. Rey. Standing in the shadows of the dimly lit corridor, she was watching him. It was at first a relief to be able to separate her from the dead woman, to see her alive, but then the fear overshadowed any comfort he felt. Instinctively, he glanced around to determine who else had seen her. Either she was not visible to the others, or none of them had noticed her yet, but he stormed toward her as if they could.

With swift strides he reached her, grasping her arm roughly, and dragging her deeper into the corridor. She ripped her arm away from him but otherwise continued to walk next to him in silence. When they reached an empty storage room, he grabbed her arm again and guided her inside. “Don’t touch me!” she spat when the door shut.

“Damn it, Rey! Do you have a death wish? They could have seen you!” His fear only added to the energy inside him spiraling out of control. Kylo ripped off his helmet as he gasped for breath. Staring at her through the damp hair that pressed against his forehead, he tried to gauge her expression. Had she seen it? Did she know what he had done?

He knew she could feel his tumultuous emotions in the Force; it was thick like a heavy cloak around them. If she hadn’t witnessed the execution, she would likely discover the reason for his emotional upheaval soon enough. Kylo wasn’t certain it was possible for her to hate him more than she already did, but if it was, she would after she discovered what he had done. The prisoners had answered the Resistance signal for help on Crait. Rey hadn’t known them, but he knew her well enough to understand that would hardly matter. It hardly mattered to him, either, and he already hated himself enough for both of them.

“What did you…” he rasped. “What did you see?”

She stared at him for a moment, her eyes weary. “Just murder,” she said cavalierly with a shrug of her shoulders, “nothing out of the ordinary for you, Supreme Leader.”

Her words destroyed him more than he cared to admit. Kylo wanted her to scream at him, call him a monster, tell him how much she hated him, care. He wouldn’t have blamed her if she tried to kill him, it was everything he deserved. He hadn’t expected her indifferent acceptance, however, as if it was all she expected from him. It hurt worse than any other reaction she could have had, and he
didn’t know why.

His breath was ragged, his body trembled, but there was no outlet to subdue the torrent of emotions… save for violence. He could only wait until she disappeared across the galaxy again and hope that the Force stole her away in time. Collapsing against the wall, Kylo slid down to the cool floor. It was too late for him to concern himself with her witnessing his vulnerability. She had already seen him at his worst, what did it matter?

It had been many years since he’d had a meltdown of this magnitude; even after… the bridge on Starkiller, he’d had an outlet for his emotions. Physical violence had become his escape, but, realistically, he knew there was no escaping this; not with her there, not like this. He was a child again, slumped against the wall of the refresher as his parents argued about him outside. Kylo knew what was coming, and it terrified him.

The darkness had faded, and the light was battling for power. It hurt – the two conflicting energies screamed inside him as they crashed and clawed for dominance over him, further fracturing his broken soul. Kylo wanted to run, but he diverted all his strength to his failing attempt to suppress the Force building inside him. He needed to destroy something before it exploded out from within him. The problem was, he had chosen an ammunition storage room containing dedlandite, battery cells, and spare blasters. In other words, he was sitting inside a bomb, and he was the ignition switch.

“Get out,” he panted as he felt the emotions inside him build to a level beyond his control. “Run!” There was no time to argue with her; destruction was imminent. Shutting his eyes tight, he shoved his hands over his ears in an attempt to shut out the noise in his head; the whispers of the light and the darkness that had grown in volume until he couldn’t discern what they were shouting anymore. He was screaming. Rationally, he knew that. Though he couldn’t hear it, he could feel it tearing at his throat. He clenched his fists as a last resort to prevent the Force from escaping through his fingertips.

Kylo could feel the objects in the room as they vibrated around him. He was well-aware of the danger. The blasters rattled uncontrollably on the shelves, boxes of dedlandite crashed to the floor. He tried desperately to pull the Force back within himself, but it only served to further destroy the room around him. Instead of an explosion, he was collapsing the walls into the room. Durasteel creaked and groaned as it bent inward, threatening to crush him under its weight. Finally, the Force snapped. All he could do was hold out his hands and brace for impact.

When he opened his eyes, his first instinct was to cough, but he instantly regretted it when he inhaled the thick cloud of dedlandite around him. The screaming pain in his throat and chest was enough to drive him to his feet. Pushing away durasteel debris, he stood to find the room in tatters… or what once had been a room. The four walls had been reduced to rubble, the ceiling straight through to the floor above had collapsed. A conference table from the upper level lay in
pieces on the broken shelves, boxes and weapons had been thrown haphazardly around the room in the impact. None of that mattered.

“Rey?” he called out hoarsely into the room between coughs, but he could only feel her energy in his mind. He released a shuddering exhale. The Force had taken her away from his destruction. A sigh from the doorway had him spinning on his heels.

“This is why the Supreme Leader kept you locked in a cage like a beast.” Hux stood on the rubble, in what had once been the doorway, his brows pinched in annoyance. “What… happened?”

“The Force.” Kylo knew how Hux hated both the Force and his propensity toward ambiguity. He stepped over blasters and debris to reach his general in the corridor. Dusting himself off, he turned away from the general – who was glaring holes through him – to the gaping crater that had been the storage room.

“It wasn’t lightsaber this time,” he volunteered.

Hux did not find it as humorous as he did. For a moment, Kylo thought the general would break his relatively controlled countenance, but the man – while slightly red and apoplectic – held his tongue until he could speak evenly. Kylo was envious. *It must be easy when you don’t have the Force.* Hux straightened his uniform and nodded in acceptance.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me, *Supreme Leader,* as you have delegated all diplomatic missions and on-world negotiations to me, I have an important meeting with the council on Kamino to discuss financial support for our cause. If you could *not* destroy anything while –”


The general’s lip curled as he stared at the ruined storage room. “Are you quite certain?”

Kylo bit back the anger rising in his throat. *Am I certain? I’m certain you’re the reason why that room is destroyed, why Rey had to see it. You were certain I had to take the lives of those prisoners. You were certain the "Supreme Leader" was needed then. “I think I can handle the Kaminoans,”

“I’ve done my research on those…” Hux’s face pinched in disgust, “creatures, have you?” Rather
than answering, Kylo turned from the general and left his destruction behind. “Mark my words, Ren, if you pull a stunt like this with our allies, they will not be so forgiving,” Hux called after him.

Mark my words, Hux, the stunt I’ll pull won’t be on the Kaminoans.

“Consider them marked,” he replied instead. Kylo could feel the heated stare on his back as he retreated to his quarters.
Violence

As the title of the chapter suggests, Kylo executes prisoners
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Kylo Ren stood over her. It was a dream. She knew it was a dream, but she couldn’t wake up. Turning away from the dark, imposing figure, Rey began running through a vast, shadowed forest. The cold of the snow leached through her boots. She shivered as she sprinted through the trees. She recognized this forest. It was the same one in her vision; it was Starkiller. Remembering the man in the mask in her vision, she only then realized it had predicted her future.

Rey stopped, pivoting in search of the masked wraith. When she turned, however, she no longer stood in a forest; a vast, barren landscape of ice stretched away as far as she could see. Kylo Ren stood in the snow next to a downed TIE fighter, his cloak coalesced with the black smoke billowing in the wind.

Rey turned and sprinted in the opposite direction. She found herself again contained in a dense forest. As she observed the snow blanketing the ground and tree limbs, she realized this place wasn’t Starkiller. The trees were too red, the snow too deep, the dark between the trees too black; this place was somewhere else. Yet it was the same place she remembered from her vision. This was an extended sequence of her original vision, only it was playing in reverse. The thought was unnerving.

The sounds of battle echoed around her. Invisible lightsabers clashed, explosions vibrated through her body, the wounded cried out in pain, the smell of smoke invaded her senses. She looked down at her hands, and they were covered in blood. Somehow, she knew it wasn’t her blood. Then she heard that voice. It was frighteningly familiar—the voice from her dreams. Barely more than a whisper, it was strained, but calm and kind. She heard it as clearly as if it whispered into her ear.

“Stay here. I’ll come back for you.” She turned, desperately searching in vain for the owner of that voice, but the forest remained empty.

“Where are you?” she called out to him. Her search became more frantic, her fear for him sending her pulse into overdrive. Coming back wasn’t good enough; she wanted him to stay.

“I’ll come back, sweetheart. I promise.” She stopped running. She knew it was too late; he had left her. But where did he go? Her eyes shifted up to the dark sky above her as she searched the stars.
“Come back!” It was a child’s voice. It was her voice, from a lifetime ago. A shadow stepped out in front of her, and she fell back.

She awoke with a start. Her heart was pounding in her chest, her hair drenched in sweat. She sighed. It was that dream again. Why did she still have that dream? She knew the voice was not her father’s voice, as she had once believed. She realized now that they had never cared. They disposed of her like garbage, as Kylo had once said. They never would have told her that. They probably didn’t even say goodbye.

She’d had a dream of that voice for as long as she could remember, so if her parents had not said those words to her, then she must have created that voice in denial—just as she had held onto the belief that they would come back. The denial she had once held onto, however, had been broken. If that voice she had dreamed of for all of those years was one that she created, then why was she still haunted by this dream?

She blinked as the room came into focus and startled when she noticed the shadow sitting in front of her. She reached out into the Force to sense the energy. Of course, it’s you. The room was dark, but she could feel it. Kylo sat, hunched forward, his elbows on his knees, in a chair she had never seen.

She gasped despite herself. Sitting up, she moved on the makeshift bed as far away from him as she could. Murderer! “Why are you here?”

“You’re – the one who did this,” he said, gesturing to his scar. “You’re afraid of me?” But she didn't sense a mocking or derisive tone. She sensed anger, but what was more unsettling was the voice in her head that shouldn’t have been there. His voice. Not you, too.

“Shouldn’t I be?” She retorted. “You have no idea what it's like; to open your eyes and find a monster staring at you, contemplating Force knows what!”

He hummed, pursing his lips.

“You're right; I have no idea at all,” he said, his eyes betraying sarcasm. “No need to fear; I am still on the Finalizer. You’re safe from this monster.” His words were sharp as he glanced away from her, clearly agitated by her reaction.

The memory of awakening to him watching her in a similarly vulnerable situation echoed in her
mind. Part of her missed that mask. It was easier to forget he had hurt her – that she had been foolish enough to let him hurt her. Her entire life on Jakku, she had been so careful not to allow anyone close enough. Then she had fallen for his tricks and allowed the enemy – the one man she knew she should not trust – to hurt her. And she was forced to see him again and again, at her most vulnerable, as he sat there and watched her with those piercing eyes.

She scanned the room for a weapon but paused when her searching eyes met his reproachful stare. “Why are you still sitting there watching me?”

“These are my quarters,” he answered with unraveling restraint. “You’re... in my bed.”

No, I’m in mine. You’re in my room.

“Get out!” she demanded. *How could I have been stupid enough to believe in you? You almost killed my friends! You killed those prisoners like they were nothing!*

He sighed dramatically. “We’ve gone over this... I can’t. I’m waiting for you to leave.” He sounded defeated and broken – for what, she didn’t care to guess. “It’s been... an *eventful* day.”

Rey remembered the moment they were last connected. She saw him standing before the prisoners, the perfect picture of intimidation. She felt the conflict raging inside him, and, for one moment, she thought he wouldn’t do it. It was her own foolish belief that there was still light in him, but she was wrong; whatever light still existed inside him would never be enough. The young woman, not much older than Rey, cried as he raised the lightsaber. He didn’t care. He didn’t care that they were defenseless. He didn’t care that two of them were obviously in love. He killed them all. Not a spark of remorse crossed the bond, even when he noticed she had watched it all. *Monster.*

When he did see her, he dared to *touch* her with the hands that had taken those lives. She had wanted to scream at him, to ask him *why*, but she felt his instability in the Force. He might as well have been screaming into the room and destroying everything in sight by the emotions that drowned them in the Force. It had been disquieting to watch the most powerful man in the galaxy fall to the floor, nails digging into the side of his head as he screamed. She had seen Kylo unraveled, but that was different.

Without thinking, she had picked up his broken helmet and brought it to him in the hope it would help calm him. She had felt the Force building to a crescendo inside him, and part of her wanted to see what would happen. She ignored his cries for her to run, but the Force dragged her away anyway. He was fine; she had felt his strong energy immediately. He was free to murder people another day and refer to it as “eventful.”
“I didn’t think murder would be considered eventful for someone like you.”

His eyes lowered to the floor. He worked his jaw as he suppressed the emotions that threatened to betray his calm exterior, but she could feel it across the connection. She had hurt him, but she reminded herself that she had nothing to feel guilty for – he deserved much worse. He glanced at something she could not see and stood.

“I was anticipating departure after a few hours of rest, but that is becoming increasingly less likely,” he sighed in resignation. “I can sleep… later.”

Something told her that “later” wouldn’t be for several days, just as something told her that it had been days since he last slept. She remembered seeing him the night in her bunk, destroying a room while he believed her to be asleep. She had assumed he was on a different day cycle across the galaxy somewhere, but she also remembered the exhaustion in his eyes and the constant draw on the Force. He was intentionally keeping himself awake. For days. Why? His next words interrupted her thoughts. “Droid, let’s go.”

An astromech droid similar in design to Beebee-Ate, save for the black and silver exterior shell and squarer shape of its domed head, rolled in from an antechamber. From what Finn had told her of their mission to the Supremacy, the First Order BB units were supposed to have malicious personalities built into their programming. It was a droid just like this one that had exposed them and nearly gotten them killed, after all.

But this one seemed different, its vocalizations portraying a very childlike personality as it expressed its fears of traveling in open space – and fears for its “master” as well. The photoreceptor and sensor seemed to be broken, as it used Kylo's leg to help navigate the room. And the Supreme Leader... allowed it. Perhaps it was his interaction with the droid, or perhaps it was remorse for her harsh words, perhaps it was her own loneliness, perhaps it was her fear of what he was planning, but she suddenly and inexplicably did not want him to leave.

“Where are you going?” She hadn’t intended to sound fearful, but his disparaging glower was proof enough that he had interpreted it that way.

He crossed the room, slumped down onto something she couldn’t see, and began sliding on his boots. She could feel the resentment rolling off him in waves. “Nowhere near your precious Resistance,” he said, exasperated.
“Look, I wish I wasn’t here, too. I can move out of your bed,” she said. “Don’t... leave. You should sleep.” There was a moment when he paused, taken aback by her request. He waited for her to continue as if her words were a momentary lapse in judgment. A weakness. Or a cruel prank.

“I don’t sleep – not quite,” he said distractedly as he laced up one boot. He shook his head as he huffed humorlessly to himself. “Not quite, nearly, almost – that should be my epitaph.” He said it with a scoff, but she could hear the resentment underneath.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” he answered, shaking his head. “Just the way my life has gone. A compilation of ‘almost.’”

She couldn’t help but feel that whatever he was talking about, it involved her. It wasn’t her fault that he had chosen darkness over his family... and her. “I don’t think Supreme Leader is ‘almost,’” she said, her voice low in warning.

He hesitated in his efforts, and his eyes grew distant. Wherever his mind was, it wasn’t there with her. “No, you wouldn’t think so,” he said. There was something in his voice; something that gave her pause, something that reminded her that there was more to Kylo than what the rest of the galaxy saw. The problem was, she didn’t know who he was underneath. She thought she had, but she’d been wrong, very wrong. That voice deep inside her was calling for her to find out as she watched him stare blankly at his boots with a look that distinctly resembled something rueful.

Perhaps it was that look that inspired her to extend him a modicum of compassion. “When was the last time you slept?”

“I don’t remember,” he said bluntly. Her question seemed to jolt him out of his pensive trance, and he began fastening his boots again.

“When will you sleep, if not now?” She cringed at the softness in her voice. He was a murderer. She wasn’t supposed to care what happened to him. She didn’t.

As he hooked his lightsaber onto his belt, he sighed. Again, his answer was brusque, as if she were irritating him. “I don’t know.”
“Why don’t you sleep?”

“I have control when I’m awake,” he said, and there was something in his eyes, something beyond the irritation. Fear. Rey knew what she feared when she slept, but what did he have to fear? Nightmares? What could a monster fear? His next words were so soft, they were barely audible over her heartbeat. “I will just meditate instead.”

Rey let out a snort of disbelief. “You? Meditate? Everything about you is the opposite of peaceful.”

His eyes met hers as she tried to contain her laughter. She could feel the slightest tinge of mirth in him as well. The bond settled, and Rey could almost feel the tendrils binding their souls together thickening and strengthening. Their bond was temporarily amicable, but his face was conflicted. Why?

*He knows that if you allow the bond to strengthen through compassion and sentiment, there will come a point when you cannot keep the other out... He will be able to read your thoughts... Manipulate you with his emotions... And find you wherever you hide...You will be weakened... Bound to a monster for eternity... But the bond is destructible... through animosity... Shut him out; protect your friends... If the monster has nightmares, do not feel sorry for him... He brought the nightmares upon himself...*

Fear tipped the balance of the bond, allowing darkness to empower her. An icy breath escaped her lips on her next exhale. *I will die before I let our bond grow stronger.* A quiver of chagrin over the connection jerked her attention back to him. She studied his fiery eyes. *Tell me, Supreme Leader, what do monsters have to fear in their nightmares?*

The exasperation that pinched his brows convinced Rey of two truths. One, he had heard her private thought. Two, he likely heard the first thought as well. She swallowed her shame. He had waited for her cruelty after she had offered him the bed to sleep, and he had not been disappointed. She had no compassion left for the man; he was a *murderer,* but she didn’t have to be cruel. That wasn’t who she was. Why did their connections make her forget that?

Kylo turned back toward his wardrobe, clearly intent upon leaving. “*Don’t,*” she said. “I’ll move out of my... your bed, and I won’t say anything more while I’m here. I’ll let you sleep.”

When he turned to her, his face was twisted in disgust. “I’m not leaving because I have nowhere to sleep. Do you honestly believe me too entitled or pretentious to sleep on the floor? You can view my life as ‘privileged,’ ‘spoiled’ and ‘blessed,’ and I won’t fault you, but clearly you are mistaken
about the luxuries provided in Jedi or Knight training,” he said. “No, I’m leaving because I can’t
do...this. I can’t be around you.” The only sound in the room was Rey’s sharp intake of breath.
How dare he act as if she were the one who destroyed everything in that throne room, as
if she were murdering people between her evil warlord meetings.

“I’m sure I’ll fade away soon, so you won’t have to suffer being around me much longer,” she
snapped, making the choice to add fuel to their growing animosity.

He ignored her comment, focusing instead on wrapping a heavy, yet elegantly crafted cloak around
his broad shoulders. It swooped in a cowl across his neck, fastened by a black and red broach
displaying the First Order insignia at his left shoulder. It had originally caught her eye, because the
entire underside of the black, hooded cloak was lined in a shiny, blood-red material. She had
thought nothing could look more menacing than his monochromatic uniform, but she had been
wrong.

He looked fierce and formidable, yes, but he also radiated an air of superiority and importance.
Perhaps his strong stature was to blame for his intimidating appearance – her reaction to him
shirtless had been evidence enough for that hypothesis – but there was no mistaking that she was in
the presence of royalty. She had no doubt she would look anything but regal in such ostentatious
attire, yet he looked the part in every way. Perhaps he had his mother to thank for that. As regally
as he portrayed himself, however, the lowly scavenger turned Jedi knight refused to be intimidated.

_The Supreme Leader already has a new cloak to match his status. Pretentious indeed._

The droid followed obediently along next to him, and she wondered if he would abandon it like
everything else he had abandoned in his life. “Is that your droid?”

Kylo stared down at the droid, considering her question. “Yes.”

Hearing her speak about him, the droid attempted to find her. She slid from the bed into a crouch
on the floor, examining him. “Does he have a name?”

Kylo watched her examine the astromech intently. His expression softened incrementally. “He was
called BB-10XZ, but he doesn’t like it. I call him ‘droid.’”

“How original,” Rey replied as she examined the droid thoroughly. “He has broken sensors.”
“And you were a scavenger.”

Rey’s eyes dragged from the droid up to his face. She hoped her stare was positively withering. Kylo swallowed his next words, shuffling uncomfortably on his feet. “When we first met, I asked you about the droid that held the map to Skywalker.”

Her scowl deepened. “I remember.”

“Of course,” he said, hesitating as he pressed his lips together in thought. “You sounded familiar with the astromech series when you said it was a ‘BB unit with a selenium drive and a thermal hyperscan vindicator, internal self-correcting gyroscope propulsion system and **optics corrected to… something I did not learn, because I told you I was familiar with general droid technological specifications – which I am to a degree– but I don’t know how to fix this, not without a reset to bring the optics back online, which could alter his central programming.”

Rey knew her face betrayed her surprise, first, by his memory and then his offer. *I understand him remembering ‘monster,’ but does he remember everything I’ve ever said to him?* She stared at him in awe. It was as if he had spoken an unknown language. In a way, he had, because he was the *Supreme Leader*. He believed she was nothing. He had access to the most skilled workers in the galaxy. He couldn’t mean it. “You're asking *me* to fix him.” Confusion bled through into her words. She cleared her throat. “*Are* you asking me to fix him?”

Kylo huffed, staring down at the droid. His next words came out as barely a whisper. “I could pay you.” It was strange, how Kylo looked at the droid as if he *cared* for him. That wasn’t possible, of course; Kylo didn’t care for anyone but himself. If he had asked her anything else, she would have told him where to shove it, but she wouldn’t allow the droid to suffer.

“Do you have the spare parts?”

He cocked his head to the side, studying her, almost as if he were taunting her. “Do you mean the ones you threw at me?”

Contempt and something that felt oddly like guilt heated her cheeks as he retrieved them from his desk and handed them to her. She dragged the tool kit she had scavenged from the supplies to where the droid waited patiently on the floor. “Hi, my name is Rey; I’m here to help you,” she told the droid, hoping to settle his fears.
The droid ignored her, chirping his fearful questions to Kylo instead. “Don’t be afraid,” Kylo murmured tenderly, soothingly. “She’ll help you.”

His voice was too gentle, too kind. It was nothing like the emotionless man hidden behind a mask. It reminded her too closely of the man in the hut. The wound he had left behind in the throne room was still raw, and she felt tears blur her vision. She wiped them away as if she were wiping her brow. “What are you doing here with him?”

Rey hadn’t expected the tale the droid wove – being treated like worthless property by the officers of the First Order, being teased ruthlessly by the other droids for having "errors" in his programming, being dropped down the garbage shoot because he was broken and different, then waiting to die until Kylo rescued him. He told her of how Kylo had tried to fix him, and when he couldn't, how he helped navigate until he could. Kylo had told him that he wasn't a good person, the droid told her. But he believed Kylo was wrong, even if the man thought he had to kill those people. The droid was speaking of someone she thought she had known once, but she had been wrong. The droid would understand that one day, too.

As Rey worked, Kylo's acute gaze became irritating. After he asked for the third time, in an obnoxiously nervous tone, “If you do that, will he still keep his programming?” she grabbed the nearest hydrospanner and pointed the business end toward him.

“Don't you have something else to do like... practice your scowl or contemplate galactic domination or figure out how many black layers you can wear before you die of heat exhaustion?” Kylo had the sense to harden his face into a mask somewhat resembling contrition. “Oh, that reminds me…” Rey jumped up and moved to the box where she knew she had stored his helmet.

“I...” Kylo hadn’t noticed her distraction. He stared down at himself, scowling, as if he only just noticed his dark choice in attire.

“Here, the connection snapped shut after I picked it up,” she shoved the helmet into his hands and resumed her work, hoping he wouldn’t press the issue. She could feel the heat of his stare and knew she wouldn’t be that lucky. When she glanced up, he was examining the mask in his gloved hands. “Weren't you about to sleep?” she asked, hoping to change the subject. “Do you always wear gloves to bed?” If she hadn't seen him after training once, she wouldn't have been surprised to discover he'd found a way to attach his clothes permanently. She was convinced he hated the sun. It made sense; he hated everything else good in the galaxy. It was probably another reason why he liked Star Destroyers.

Kylo narrowed his eyes and tilted his head, observing her slightly askance, but he allowed the question on his tongue to die, for which Rey was thankful. Instead of prying as to why she had asked him what he wore to bed, he placed the helmet over his head. She returned to her work with a
derisive snort.

“I didn’t know how long you would be here. I thought you would be less... uncomfortable this way,” he said, the deep electronic hiss of the servomotors in his mask sending chills down her spine. He glanced away in frustration... or shame; she hated how difficult he was to read with the helmet hiding his features. He huffed a breath, his fist clenching and unclenching at his side.

She wrapped the darkness around herself like a shawl, protecting herself from his attempts at coaxing her into complacency. “Oh, you’re right. The mask and gloves remind me of everything horrible you have ever done to me, and then it’s easier to remember the murderous creature you are, so thank you,” she said.

He surprised her by raising his hands to press the release on his helmet, removing it slowly, though he had only just put it on, his eyes downcast. His attention shifted to the helmet for a moment before speaking. “You fixed it.” When his eyes did return to hers, it was difficult to reconcile their softness with the genocidal megalomaniac he was known to be. He may have looked the part of Supreme Leader, Emperor of the galaxy, but he suddenly seemed more like a boy playing dress-up than the monster of nightmares.

“I could have made it good as new if you hadn’t welded it back together with a lightsaber. I’m not sure what you did to it, but –”

“I destroyed it,” he whispered as his fingers traced over the ridges created by his inexperienced hands. “After Snoke told me I would never be as powerful as my grandfather because I had ‘too much of my father’s heart in me.’”

“Why?” She had spoken the one word before she had considered whether she wanted to know.

“Because I hadn’t been capable enough to retrieve the map from you, and I had never lost in combat, but then I failed against ‘a girl who never held a lightsaber before.’ He said it wasn’t your strength,” he scoffed as if the idea was absurd, “but my weakness. Weak and foolish, like my father. Too sentimental like my grandfather.”

“I don’t understand. Did he think you were you too much like your grandfather or not enough?” Kylo didn’t answer her, and she refused to look up to see the expression on his face. The gentleness in his voice was disarming enough on its own.
What happened to him? What happened to the cruel, confident man who threatened to kill me only days ago? The man who killed innocents?

The worst part was – as fervently as she denied it – she still cared what had happened to him. It disgusted her. She would never fit in with the Resistance if felt concern for the enemy.

The droid beeped in excitement and gratitude as she finished repairing the sensor – the obviously not red sensor – of the BB units of the First Order. “All fixed…programming intact,” she said, glaring at Kylo in annoyance, but his stare was fixed on the droid.

“It's blue,” Kylo said as he studied the new sensor, but he didn't sound disappointed. There was a brightness to it, almost a childlike wonder. She must have been imagining it. It was easier to believe him to be either violent or brooding than the complex man before her. The droid chirped nervously, fearing this new difference.

“You’re different,” she told the little astromech, reexamining her repair. “Good different.” Something crossed Kylo’s face at her response, but it faded into something unreadable as swiftly as it had appeared. The droid answered in binary. Rey scrunched her nose. “Blue isn’t really a droid name, but what about ‘Ex’ or ‘Zee’ or ‘Tenex?’” she offered.

“You can have whatever name you want.” There was something in Kylo’s tone that told her the comment applied to more than just the droid. He was adamant to the point of straddling the line of anger. Rey turned to the droid and nodded in agreement. Kylo moved to step closer to Rey but hesitated, then increased the distance between them instead. “How much do I owe you? I have credit chips or ingots in the safe. Do you have a preference?”

Rey stood, dusting off her trousers. Though she had been kneeling next to a droid on his Star Destroyer, there were red patches of dirt on her pants from the temple. “Of course, you have a private safe. You probably have more currency in there than I’ve seen in my entire life.”

Kylo stared at her, expression unreadable. The only indication of his contrition was the slight shift of the apple in his throat. He wasn't foolish enough to argue with her, which only served to anger her more. “I'll give you everything that's in there if you want it.” His own eyes seemed to widen slightly at his offer.

She remembered a time she stood next to another BB unit, starving, when she was offered enough portions to change her life. She hadn't taken the offer then, at her most desperate, and she wouldn't take the offer now. She wouldn’t owe him anything.
“I don't want anything from you or the First Order.”

He nodded once, either not offended by her rebuke or concealing it well. “Will you accept my gratitude, then?” She rolled her eyes at his pretentious speech. He must have assumed her silence was acceptance, or he didn’t care either way, because he continued, “Well… thank you for helping him, Rey.”

It was only after he said it that she realized how rarely he had spoken her name aloud since the Supremacy, especially with such tenderness. She hadn't anticipated how painful it would be to hear that one syllable, only three letters, formed by his lips. “I didn't do it for you,” she assured him. “I did it for Blue.”

The astromech chirped brightly at the name. Kylo knelt on the other side of the droid, his hands carefully inspecting her work. “Hey Blue, can you see me? Can you scan the room?” She hadn’t expected Kylo to use the name, and a strange churning in her stomach followed the thought.

Rey had expected the droid to take off rolling now that he could navigate with ease, but he nudged into Kylo's knee, head lowered, the BB unit's closest approximation of an embrace. His beeps and whirrs were quiet, but she understood enough. He was calling Kylo “master,” thanking the man for not giving up on him and begging him not to be sent away. Kylo dipped his own head and whispered something back, but it was too soft for her ears. This man was incongruous to the image of Kylo Ren she had formulated in her head. It hurt to see glimpses of the man she thought he was.

But he is Kylo Ren, the voice reminded her. Just ask him… Remember what he did to kill Ben Solo.

She searched for anything she could to push him away, to protect herself from further heartache. Kylo was not a good person; what he had done to her was testament to that. “Good, now that you have a droid, you can find better use of your time than watching me sleep.”

Giving the droid a soft pat, he stood from his kneeling position, looming a few paces away, fidgeting with his gloves. They both knew he was lingering, delaying the inevitable, finding any excuse not to leave. Something deep inside her begged to give him an excuse, but the darkness silenced that swiftly. “I wasn’t watching you, not like that… I was... concerned. You sounded upset,” he replied, softer than she preferred. “Nightmares – do you have them often?” He raised his eyes to search hers.
Had he seen her dream?

“You, Supreme Leader? Concerned? For anyone other than yourself?” she laughed coldly, sidestepping his prying question. “My dreams are of no consequence to you.”

“I suppose not...” There was something in his eyes, however. It was that same look he had when they first met, the one that suggested he knew more about her than she did herself. It made her uncomfortable in a feverish way.

“You know all about my dreams and nightmares, though, don’t you, since you’ve forced yourself into my mind?” she asked resentfully, veiling her other emotions under the superficial darkness scavenging on her anger.

_I wish you would just disappear already. It's easier when I don't have to look at you._

His body stiffened, his fists clenched, and he stepped forward to leave. Then he paused. He lowered his eyes again and was quiet, his emotions teetering on the edge of an unknown chasm. Had she known what the consequences would be if she pushed him, she would have.

_If it is truly me who is breaking this man down, then what happens if I continue? Will he turn? Fall to pieces? Or repeat his wrath on Crait?_

She shuddered. He was tormentingly unpredictable.

Kylo also had the tactical advantage in their bond. He appeared to have the ability to insulate his thoughts and emotions from her at will. She had no knowledge of Force Bonds or the intricacies of this predicament they were enslaved within. Fear of the unknown tore at her every waking moment.

_Can he hear all my thoughts? Can he see where I am? Can he find us? Can he use the bond to hurt my friends? How much does he know, because of me? Can he show up whenever he wants? Can I find a way to end the connection like I accidentally did on Crait? How do I block myself off from him? Can I ever end this permanently?_

“I only hear your mind when... this... happens,” he sighed. “Your thoughts are loud; I don’t search for them. I do not desire any more voices in my head. Trust me. And I have no intent to use you,
Rey – to find your friends or otherwise. I said those things out of... it doesn’t matter. Just know that I didn’t mean them. I can’t show up whenever I want... at least I don’t know how to yet. I do think we are somehow responsible for establishing each connection, though.”

“I know that it is possible to sever the connection temporarily as you did on Crait, it only requires a resolve devoid of conflict. I have the same control over this as you do, which is not enough. And if you want to block your mind from me, find my energy in your consciousness and actively block that energy with the Force. It won’t stop this,” he gestured with his hand, “I’ve tried, but it does block thoughts and emotions from bleeding through.” She blushed, focusing in her mind at blocking his energy. Why would he tell her this? How did it benefit him?

“How do you think the connection is established then, if it isn’t the Force’s will? And if you know that all it takes is determination to sever the connection, then why don’t you do it?” she asked skeptically. She barely noticed that the man determined to leave her only moments before had reassumed his position in the chair across from her.

“This is all conjecture, without your help, but I presume either you or I consciously open the connection by thinking of the bond. Our first ever connection occurred when I was in the medbay receiving treatment for this,” he pointed to the scar bisecting his face.

“I was focused on how I received that scar. The second time, I was considering our new connection. The others... I’m not certain. Some of them, perhaps, but the connection after training, I know it wasn’t me. My thoughts had been in a dark place. Tonight, I’m positive I did this. I was thinking about what you saw today. So if those other moments you were thinking of me... of our bond – even in hatred – then we know it is not random. If not, then it could be moments of vulnerability,” he murmured, staring down at his clasped hands. “And, yes, I said determination could sever the connection, but I also said it had to be a decision devoid of conflict. I think you know why I haven’t been very successful in closing the connection. But now that you know how, you can do it. Perhaps if you do it enough, the bond will weaken, and fade entirely.”

To say she was surprised by his answer was an understatement. Their usual banter was completely under his control. He would stonewall or counter-question to direct the discussion to his will. But this answer seemed less calculated, and the most he had ever spoken to her. Her immediate reaction was to reward his honesty with her own.

After her experience in the cave, she had desperately wanted to speak to him. The other instances she had been thinking of him, whether it was positive or negative was irrelevant. But she didn’t want to admit it, to give him the satisfaction of solving it. He was doing it again – becoming that contemplative student seeking a partner to help analyze an interesting problem – and it terrified her. Instead, she searched deep within herself for the resolve to close the connection. She shut her eyes, imagining her room without him in it. An empty, quiet... lonely room. A room where she would never have to hear his voice or feel his knowing eyes on her again.
Is that what I want?

It was… complicated. When they were apart, she hated him, but there was still a deeper yearning for answers that she couldn’t erase. She needed to understand the contradiction between Kylo Ren and the glimpses of the man she thought she had seen on that island – the man she had thought was Ben Solo. As unequivocally as the Resistance needed her to end the bond with him, Rey wavered. To no one’s surprise, he was still sitting there when she opened her eyes again. He raised an eyebrow in intrigue.

Don’t. Say. Anything.

Rey lowered her stare to her hands in chagrin. Evidently, his stare followed. “What happened to your hand?” he asked quietly. His sudden change in topic would have been welcome if his prying question hadn’t suggested an ulterior motive that was likely sinister in nature. Her eyes inspected the red circular burns dappling her palm.

The acid rain.

He is searching for information on the Resistance… He is still the enemy… Don’t allow him to seduce you into complacency… You will pay for it with your lives… the whisper warned.

“Those are… bruises from training,” she lied. When she met his stare again, his eyes were guarded. They did not flicker with a hint of either acceptance or doubt. She feared he could see straight through her lie, but he said nothing that suggested he rejected her explanation. She was confident he would not knowingly allow her to answer an inquiry of his with anything but the truth. When he did not challenge her, she concluded he had accepted her answer. “What else do you know about the bond?” she asked hastily, refocusing their discussion.

“Not enough,” he answered. “I know it’s a Force Bond. I’ve never seen this before, save for my… save for Leia and Luke. But they couldn’t see each other. Or touch. No, this is something else. Something… unique. And it is growing stronger. At first, all I could see was you. But now… I see some of your surroundings. I hear your thoughts.”

“We can hurt each other now,” she reminded him, “and I can feel what you feel.”
There was a flash of distrust in his eyes, but it faded the longer he stared at her. The intensity returned with something terrifyingly knowing. “I think you’ve always been able to feel what I feel, Rey.”

No. He was wrong. She hadn’t been able to feel anything from him before Snoke had bridged their minds. It was a simpler time when all she knew about her enemy was his desire to be as powerful as his evil grandfather. It was simpler when all he was to her was a murderer. “I guarantee when I cut your face open, I felt nothing.”

“Maybe not physically,” he said, releasing her from his all-consuming to glance down at his clasped hands. “But maybe you were still influenced by the bond. You barely knew my family, but you were drawn to them. Do you ever wonder why? Why did you think of Luke as a hero? Why were you so disappointed when he failed you? Why do you think of Leia as a mother? Why do you fear that you’ll never be good enough for her? Why did you see Han as a father? Why were you disappointed when he was dismissive toward you? And then, when he praised you, why did it mean everything? Why were you devastated when I killed him? You knew him for a day. Maybe… maybe you were experiencing more than just your own emotions toward them.”

Rey stepped closer, lowering her voice to a growl. “No, no, that had nothing to do with you. I don’t care what you think you’ve seen in my mind; you have no idea what I feel toward them. Luke was a hero, Leia is everything I always wished for in a mother, and a general, and I was devastated because Han was a good man! He and Finn came back for me. He didn’t deserve to die. I didn’t get that from the bond. What I felt… you’ll never understand. You weren’t devastated because you murdered him.”

“Ah, yes, I forgot, you know everything you need to know about me,” he said in a tone that suggested she still didn’t. But she did. He had revealed exactly who he was in that throne room, on Crait, and in that execution hall. “Have you ever wondered why you hate me so deeply? Why – from the very second you met me – before you even knew me, you have wished for my death?”

“If you expect me to believe my hatred toward you is influenced by the bond, then I would be happy to…” put you out of all our misery. The darkness in her implored her to finish her thought, but she couldn’t bring herself to say it. She had shouted similar words as you threw droid parts at him, but she had regretted it later. As shameful as it was to admit – and for reasons she didn’t care to contemplate – she didn’t want him to die. “Look, that stuff doesn’t matter anyway. Let’s focus on what’s important, okay? This is getting stronger. I think we can both agree that is the opposite of what we want.”

“Right,” he said, tone clipped as he straightened.

“Luke…” She watched his expression harden further as she dared to utter his uncles’ name. “Or his
Force energy anyway, told me he had never seen a Force Bond so strong. He said he had never seen one between a dark and a light user before, either.”

She sensed resentment, of course, but also... jealousy... in his voice. “Luke. He came to you again?”

“Again?”

“Other than the time when he helped you find me in the Force,” he replied bitterly. “You remember, when you attempted to infiltrate my consciousness to gain information for the Resistance?”

What is he talking about?

“I only saw him once. And he helped me find our bond. I wasn’t trying to ‘gain information for the Resistance,’ nor did I think about doing that, honestly, but I had so many questions about our connection, and he was trying to help me answer them,” she assured him, immediately annoyed by the indulgent gesture.

His eyes narrowed as he keenly searched hers for something. Whatever it was, he must have found it, because his features softened. Those eyes. They lured her in. At first, she had thought his eyes were as sable as the hair that fell haphazardly over his forehead. But just as there was to Kylo himself, there was so much more to those venerable eyes. The centers were warm, a deep amber, enveloped in an almost golden halo that flickered celestially in the light. He could hide an entire galaxy behind them, but even that would not reach their depths.

And yet, when his eyes focused on her, she was – if just for a moment – the only person in the entire universe. There was a piercing, penetrating ferocity to his eyes, but in those intimate moments between just the two of them, there was also a vulnerable softness to them. And the knowledge behind them... had she been told the millennia old, collective wisdom of the Cosmic Force had been stored within those eyes, she would have believed it. She had seen her fair share of evil eyes in her life – Niima Outpost was no stranger to unsavory characters – but his pained eyes... they were haunting because they were not meant for an enemy.

Rey shuddered. Her eyes danced to his lips as they parted, his breathing quiet but uneven. Realizing the inappropriateness of her glance, she focused on his strong nose instead. But she could feel the fervid heat of his stare, and her eyes unwittingly darted back up to meet his. Something flashed across his eyes, too swiftly for her to interpret, but the change stirred her conflicted emotions. There was a heaviness to the air around them, a polarity that drew her to him. It was
maddening... and dangerous.

He is a monster... Do not forget what you learned on the Supremacy... He is trying to use your bond to kill you and your friends... He is manipulating you, by seducing you... Do not trust him, the Force's voice reminded her.

She searched for anything to say to cut through the gravity in the room. She hoped sharp words would disguise the weakness in her voice, which was heavy with emotion.

“I wanted to learn everything I could from Luke, because I wanted to know how to end this.” Her attempt was successful. His eyes dropped to his hands as he pressed his lips together firmly. His brow furrowed, and he shifted weight back into his chair. She could nearly feel the shield he had hastily constructed between them. The darkness numbed her, but it still stung.

“I killed the only one strong enough to show me how to end it. Apparently, the same one who created it,” he whispered. “So I am as ‘in the dark,’ so to speak, with this as you are. If I knew how to end this, I promise, I would.”

He looks so...alone. But who does he have left, other than a droid? Maybe he is alone. Maybe I was the only other person who understood that loneliness. He was the only one who understood that loneliness in me.

She shivered as she thought about their intimate moment together in the hut on Ahch-To. It was difficult not to see the same vulnerable man in front of her as the one that touched her hand that night.

It was his decision. He could have turned. We are both alone because that was the choice he made in the throne room.

“Do you regret killing Snoke?” she asked. The mention of his name sent a visible shudder through Kylo.

“Are you asking if I would do it again?” his voice was quiet but sincere. “Save you?”

Save me? We both know that's not why you did it.
“Yes,” she heard herself answer instead. Her stomach twisted in anticipation. Despite her desire for his feelings to be worthless to her, she knew his response had the potential to further break her heart. Was she nothing to him? Knowing her answer in the throne room, would he throw her away like garbage this time, as her parents did? Or would he still save her?

“I would.” There was not an ounce of conflict in his voice, but it was the thought she heard in her mind, words spoken in his deep voice that she knew she should not be privy to, that intrigued her the most. *I would save you every time*, his voice whispered in her mind. Her chest swelled with warmth at his admission, but the frigid darkness quickly tempered it. He pressed his lips together tightly and swallowed. She sensed he had wanted to say more, but thought better of it.

*Of course, he would... He enjoys the power you helped him acquire... And he still believes that you will join him after he destroys the Resistance...* The voice from the Force whispered. *But don’t be mistaken... He would have killed you if you stood in his way... Just like he killed his father, Han Solo.*

“Do you regret killing your father?” she asked. He stared at her quietly for a moment, his expression pained. “If you would kill your own father, then I have no reason to believe that you would not kill me, too.” Rey could sense the turmoil raging inside him. His breath was uneven. The expression in his eyes was the same as the first time they met on Starkiller when she forced her way into his mind. He slammed them shut like a door, forcing her out. His head tipped forward, his shoulders slumped, heaving under the weight of his thoughts.

“I’m going to try to end this, okay?” His voice cracked with emotion. His eyes flickered up to hers, glossy with tears. She had pushed him off the edge, and he was falling to pieces. She nodded slowly. “It will hurt, more than you can even imagine, but I’ll feel it too. I’ll stop if you ask. This is the only way to be free.” She nodded again, hesitantly, but he must have presumed the pause was due to fear of pain rather than reluctance to leave him. He sucked in a breath and closed his eyes, his hand outstretched toward her temple. He focused intently on something in the Force. The emotions flooding the bond disappeared on both sides. His presence pulled away from her consciousness.

*He's not trying to just close the connection.* she realized. *He is trying to shut me out completely. He’s trying to sever the bond forever.*

A searing pain split through her mind and a rolling nausea crashed through her body, as he tried to force their linked connection to separate. Crying out into the room, she grasped her head in her hands. Every molecule inside her vibrated, tearing her apart, and forcing her to collide back into him. His memories and hers were jumbled together – conversations, emotions, preferences, knowledge. There were too many sensations at once as she carried the light, darkness, pain of two
people and then lost it all again. She felt the tendrils snap through her soul as he attempted to divide the glowing cord of their bond. He was physically rending their souls apart. He was powerful, strong and determined, and he was giving it everything he had, but the bond was fighting back.

Sweat poured from his forehead. His face twisted into an agonized grimace as he groaned under the pressure, but it wasn’t enough. She knew he was suffering just as much as she was. She had felt true psychological torture only once before when Snoke pried into her mind, but that paled in comparison. This wasn’t just tearing her mind apart, but tearing her soul. This pain was unbearable, but she fought to suffer through it as long as she could.

*Be strong and help him end this. Think of the Resistance. You want this to go away.*

At least that is what she told herself. It was true; the conflict was tormenting and the last few days had only made it worse. She wanted that suffering to end. But that didn’t stop the panic from erupting from somewhere deep inside at the thought that they would be separated forever. She knew he would be lost to the darkness. If he severed the bond, she would lose any chance she had of saving Ben Solo. Why was it only then, when he was tearing them apart, that she believed he could still be saved? She would be abandoned again... alone forever. When the intense pain finally became too overwhelming, as she was on the border of unconsciousness, she heard herself scream.

“Stop!”

The second he heard her cry, his eyes snapped open. The pain was instantly gone. The realization hit her like a blast to the stomach. The bond had wrapped its grasp possessively around her soul and would not budge. His voice echoed in her mind.

*This only ends with death.*

He jumped to his feet and threw something heavy on his side of the bond. She startled when it crashed and shut her eyes as he howled in helplessness behind her. He left the room without another word, the Force Bond closing with the blast door in his chambers. Did he do that? Did he close the connection on his own? She noticed her hand was extended. Without realizing it, she had reached for him as he left. She glanced up from her fingers to see a shadow standing in the archway to her room.

“Ben?” she whispered apprehensively.
“Poe,” he growled, stepping into the light.

Panic shuddered down her spine. “Poe, I… I had a nightmare, I thought I was still asleep.” Rey stumbled over her words in her fearful desperation to convince him of a lie, but she hoped it had been enough. She couldn’t explain the truth, not yet. “What are you doing here?”

He studied her for a moment, his gaze distrustful. “I heard shouting and crashing, I was concerned.”

She shrugged. “Force nightmares.” He studied her for another long moment, nodded his head and walked back down the corridor. She sighed and collapsed back into her makeshift bed.

Why was she relieved that Kylo had been unable to break the connection? Why was she left feeling the same guilt and regret that she had felt every single time she had seen him? She felt caught between fighting against him because he was her enemy and being drawn to him by forces she couldn’t explain. She knew she should hate him – that everything he had ever done to her was wrong, so why did she regret the words she said and the things she did when it was everything that he deserved? What was it about him that made that voice inside her refuse to listen to logic?

When she turned her head to switch off the glowrod on her wall, she noticed something on the crate at her bedside. It was purple with white stripes. A fruit. It hadn’t been there before.

*Ben.*
Chapter End Notes

Violence

They try to sever the bond which causes them both psychological duress
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
“I don’t know what to do,” Finn admitted. “You’re the only one I can talk to about this. It’s Rey. I’m worried about her. She is playing with fire, and I don’t know if she is too naïve to realize it. She has some sort of Force Bond... I don’t like that word; it’s too personal... Force tether to the most evil man in the galaxy. She can hurt him, which means he can hurt her. She is strong and brave and has defeated him before, but he’s a killing machine. If she had only seen what I’ve seen…”

He shuddered as he remembered the moment that the monster pinned him against the tree. “I know what this man is capable of. I’ve witnessed his savagery. He is not only cruel and merciless, but behind that mask is an incredibly intelligent and manipulative mind. I fear that she underestimates him. There is no telling the lengths he will go to find us through her. And the way she speaks about him like she almost has... no, it couldn’t be compassion. She just has hope he will turn, and it’s
frightening. I made her a promise not to tell anyone. But if she would put us all in danger, is it better to think of the survival of Resistance or to keep the promise I made to my friend? She will always have my loyalty, but I fear that being the friend she wants and being the friend she needs might become two different paths.”

He sighed, adjusting his jacket over the woman sleeping next to him. “Thanks for listening, Rose,” he whispered as a single tear escaped down his cheek. He leaned down and gently brushed a stray lock of hair from her cheek.

“I wish I could tell you this. I wish I could tell you all about it. And I desperately wish I could share my feelings for you. I’m just...scared. Everything I have ever loved or cared about has been taken away from me. I found a cause worth fighting for, but you and Rey will always be the most important people in my life. You almost died because of your feelings for me. If I let myself love you, if I tell you how much you mean to me, then what will happen if...”

“Finn, buddy!” he heard his friend call from behind him.

“Hey, I didn’t hear you standing there.” Finn smiled, quickly wiping his tear-stained cheeks on his shoulder. “Rose fell asleep on the altar while we were talking, so I thought I would sit here with her for a while. You’re up late. It’s the middle of the night cycle.”

“Oh, I haven’t been standing here long. I can’t sleep. I was visiting Leia. How are you holding up?” Poe asked, throwing an arm around Finn’s shoulders.

“As well as I can, I guess,” he answered, “How’s Leia?”

Poe’s eyes darkened. “I don’t think she is going to make it, Finn,” he admitted. “Kylo Ren has singlehandedly destroyed everything that she loves. Han Solo...Luke Skywalker...now the Resistance... Her body was weak after he tried to kill her on the Raddus, and maybe it was only a matter of time. But I just don’t think she can survive without that Force connection to Luke. It’s like their fates are interconnected. She is weakening more every hour. I think she is going to die because of their severed bond...because of Kylo Ren. What is worse, is she will die with a broken heart, and there is nothing I can do to change that. I love her like a second mother, but I will never be able to do enough to make up for what he has done to her. All the pain she carries is because of him. She is the strongest person I know, but I don’t think even she can pull through this.”

“Do you think that is how it is for all Force connections? If one of them dies, the other dies, too?” Finn asked anxiously. Poe examined his face very carefully.
“Why?” He spoke the word slowly and deliberately. Finn nervously stammered as he searched for a reasonable answer. But Poe just watched him curiously as he squirmed, like a predator luring its prey into a trap. His eyes searched for answers that Finn feared he would find. “No, I don’t,” Poe answered abruptly, “Leia and Luke were twins. What they had was unique.” Finn sighed in relief. “I do have a question for you, though, since you’re here.”

“Sure,” Finn smiled, “Anything.”

“Do you think…” Poe hesitated, “That Rey is committed to the Resistance?”

“Of course!” But it was Finn’s turn to ask suspiciously, “Why?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I know she saved us all. There are just some strange things she has said. And there is a bounty on her head, for killing Snoke. She was on the Supremacy and never told us. Why was she there, and why didn’t she tell anyone? I can’t shake the feeling that she is lying to us… about Kylo Ren.

“I was in the corridor a couple of minutes ago. You’re here, everyone else is asleep, but I swear I heard voices coming from her room. I swear I heard a man’s voice. When I was walking down the corridor, I swear I saw a shadow walk out of her room, and I would recognize that violent stride anywhere. I had to be imagining it, because there is no way the Supreme Leader was here. But, then again, when I walked into her room, she called me ‘Ben.’ She said it was a nightmare, but she said ‘Ben,’ not ‘Ren.’ I know what I heard.”

Poe paced for a moment in agitation. He mumbled to himself as he fussled with his hair before shifting his eyes back to Finn. “I don’t know much about the Force, but I do know this. If Leia... is gone, they will be the only two Force users left in this war. I can’t help but worry that, without Luke, Rey will search out the only person who can teach her about her new powers. She just seems so secretive. But maybe that is my own fear of how dangerous Kylo Ren can be that is making me paranoid. I mean, if he finds us we’re all dead, right?” he laughed, which made Finn uncomfortable, the emotion out of place with the consequence of his words. “But you know her best; she isn’t hiding anything, is she?

Finn was quiet as he contemplated Poe’s argument. Rey hated Kylo, didn’t she? She would never betray the Resistance. She just needed time. “I’ll talk to her,” he assured him.

“And if there is something going on,” Poe said, studying him. “You’ll tell me, right?”
Finn nodded vehemently. “Yes, I will. I promise.” Poe nodded in return and began walking down the corridor but stopped himself in the archway. He rapped his knuckles on the wall and pivoted his head enough for Finn to hear him.

“Tell her how you feel, Finn.” he smiled, nodding at Rose. “I know it’s not the same, but the last time I saw my mother, I refused to say ‘goodbye’ because I thought if I didn’t, then it wouldn’t be. It was. You’re in love either way. Trust me, if something terrible were to happen, you’ll regret the words you didn’t say more than the ones you did.”
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story is 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Kylo tentatively closed his eyes, his gloved fingertips pressed gently onto the cold surface of the controls in the interior of his command shuttle. Blue quietly busied himself with exploring the hidden secrets of the ship's computer. They had made the jump to lightspeed to enter hyperspace, and though Kylo wasn't irresponsible enough to sleep between jump points, he could at least rest. He desperately sought the peace of meditation.

Eyes closed, he pushed deeper into the Force. The first level was senses and perception, the second was emotions – which were thankfully limited on a ship with only a droid in the vastness of space – the third was the visible energy that made up the galaxy around him, and the fourth was the whispers of the Cosmic Force. The fifth was rumored to be the Cosmic Force itself. Luke had said the fourth level was the closest one could come to the fifth. It was where one could purportedly commune with Force ghosts.

It had been years since Kylo had allowed himself to fall into the fourth level of meditation. Snoke… Sidious had forbidden it, and Luke had been overly interested and critical of what he had perceived. Without the guiding, controlling, voices of Luke or Sidious in his head, he allowed himself to sink deeper into the Force. Rey may have believed meditation was antithetical to the war within him, but if he could spend his entire life in meditation, he would. It was a way to ascend beyond the conflict of his mind. It was the closest he had ever come to peace.

Distantly, he heard Blue express his displeasure at being levitated off the floor. Kylo felt himself lose contact with the seat as he sank deeper into the Force. Sound disappeared, then his physical connection to the ship, followed by the chaotic thoughts that crashed through his mind, and, finally, his emotions. It would take several minutes to quiet his thoughts, but he knew it was within his grasp. It felt slightly unnerving, but he craved the peace it promised.

There were no voices there, except his own. He routinely used meditation as an escape from the voices in his head, though it was different now that a certain voice was missing permanently.

At first, the silence was the most peaceful sound he had ever heard. He knew the choices he made were the ones he desired; he was free. But now the silence was lonely and terrifying and... dementing. Kylo was accustomed to loneliness. His entire life consisted of trading one loneliness for another, but from his first memory as a toddler, there were the whispering voices in his head. For as long as he could remember, it was all he had ever known. When the voices disappeared, it was as if he lost a part of himself, as if he had become numb to one of his senses.

Even when he sought the foolish comfort of a voice, there was only silence... and that was a new, more profound type of loneliness. It was the worst loneliness he had ever known. He hated Sidious and himself for allowing the creature to control him for so long. The scars buried underneath his
skin from Sidious's “training” were nothing compared to the damage he had done psychologically. There were parts of him that understood that he would never be free of the aftermath of Sidious's pervasive destruction of his mind.

As detrimental as Sidious had been, however, it was all he had ever known. Without him, Kylo had no one to defer to for guidance, no one to keep him focused on his path, no one to give him purpose. It was sickening to realize; he didn't know what to do without him. Even when the voices whispered how worthless he was, the anger...the fear...the hatred was something to hold on to. The only voice in his head now was his own, and that was more tormenting than Sidious could ever be.

Then again, Kylo wondered if his own thoughts were truly his own. He was accustomed to Sidious’s voice in his head, so much so that he didn't know which thoughts were his own, and which were just echoes of his former master's words. Sidious’s whispers were lies and manipulations to use him for his power. Deep down he knew that, but he didn’t know who he was without it. Sidious had convinced him that his thoughts were Kylo’s own thoughts, much as he persuaded weaker-minded individuals that his "suggestions" were their own desires. He was weakness, properly manipulated into a sharp tool. He was the rabid cur.

Sidious was gone – at least in the form of Snoke – but his influence was forever fragmented in his mind, like tiny pieces of glass mixed in sand. How could he start over with such deeply ingrained, pervasive damage? How could he live with the silence? How would he ever know his thoughts were his own? Was there even a point anymore? As long as he was alive, Hux would do everything in his power to bring Sidious back, and he definitely wouldn't be lonely in his own head anymore.

Then again, the voices weren’t truly gone. *Her* voice was in his head – not all the time, not in a way that drowned out his own, but it was still there. Though their agendas were vastly different, she still tried to manipulate him as much as Sidious did. Her voice terrorized him, but not in the way Sidious’s had. He was drowning; he’d always been drowning, and she... was a lifeline. Or at least she had been, but even she had left him to face the waves himself. *At least she’s honest about using me,* he mused. His mind was chaos. Disorder. Damaged and broken. Adding her to the mix would only further his conflict, but he willfully didn’t shut her out. He equally craved and feared the silence, but he felt an even stronger pull to *her.* Perhaps, it would not be so terrible if his master returned through Force Destiny. At least he would know his path...

His stomach churned at the thought.

*No!*

Every nerve ending crackled with the echo of a pain that the creature had inflicted upon him. He had deserved it all, naturally, but Rey... Rey deserved none of the Hell she had suffered because of him. He wouldn't do it; he wouldn't allow his darkness to bring that kind of evil upon them. If
Sidious returned, Kylo knew he wouldn’t be strong enough to resist his control. Sidious would kill Rey; he was no fool, he knew how powerful she was becoming. She was strong, she would never join him. And Kylo would be powerless to protect her.

Kylo knew this wasn’t the path to reaching the fourth level in the Force. He couldn’t find answers to stop his former master if he didn’t allow his thoughts and fears to die. He couldn’t let Rey be right, not about this. His mind may have been chaotic with thoughts, but he’d had plenty of practice. It may have been the only scenario in which he could find peace, but he *could* find it. With one last, deep exhale, he let it go, until he thought of nothing at all. Only then did he descend further into the Force.

It had been years since he felt the absence of everything; he had forgotten its touch, but the familiarity of it was immediately soothing. If this was what it was like to die, to join the Force – no thoughts or emotion – then perhaps death would not be something worth fighting any longer. Sliding into the complete nothingness, for a split second, he had peace. Then he heard the familiar voice. *Ben, please…*

Kylo jolted at the sound of his uncle’s voice. As his eyes snapped open in fear, both he, the droid and everything else levitating in the ship crashed to the floor. Before Kylo could gain his bearings, there was a vibration of energy buzzing around him. He could sense the slight pull of her consciousness at the back of his mind as he scrambled back into the Captain’s seat. He impulsively removed his gloves. It occurred to him that she viewed him as less of a monster that way.

Why did he care?

He steadied his breathing as his eyes darted anxiously around the dark room illuminated solely by hyperspace. When he raised his eyes to the viewport, he could see the reflection of trees behind him. If he concentrated intently enough, he could almost hear the wind whispering through the leaves. He could almost smell the damp, rich soil. He couldn’t see her, but he felt her.

Somewhere across the galaxy, Rey sat in the jungle, presumably reclining peacefully against a tree only seconds before. For the moment, at any rate, she leaned against him instead, her back expanding and contracting with each breath. He listened quietly, reluctant to use the Force and alert her to his presence. But it was inevitable.

Her breathing quickened.

*She knows.*
Kylo remained perfectly still, wary of her reaction. He couldn’t take any more of her spiteful words, couldn’t stand to see the hatred in her eyes. Or disappointment. Or fear. He wished he was strong enough to end the bond like she wanted. Releasing the breath he’d been holding, he was confounded that she hadn’t reacted at all. She was reading from an actual book; he heard the physical pages turning beneath her fingertips. She was clearly ignoring him, and he remained reticent.

Whispers in the Force around him jolted him in his seat. He hadn't heard the voices of the light in nearly a decade. “First comes the day, then comes the night. After the darkness shines through the light. The difference, they say, is only made right by the resolving of gray, through refined Jedi sight.”

He immediately recognized it. It was an excerpt from the Journal of the Whills. Rey must have more of the Jedi texts, he surmised. She was quiet, not nearly as disturbed as he was by the voices. He was unsure if she was reading to herself, so he remained quiet as well, listening to her breathe. He waited in anticipation of the inevitable...the fear... the fight...but nothing happened.

They were seated back to back, completely aware of the other’s presence, yet neither whispered a word. The heaviness of the silence spoke volumes. It was madness wondering what she was thinking. He drowned in the words he yearned to say to her, yet knew he could never voice. He didn't want to ruin their current... reprieve...with more words that would come out wrong.

It wasn’t her next movement that surprised him; he could feel the shift of her energy in the Force long before he felt the jump of the muscles in her back as she moved her arms. No, it wasn’t the movement that caused him to flinch, but the realization that she had casually placed her hand next to his.

Her hand was close enough that he could move his pinky and touch her. He suppressed the overwhelming urge to feel the warmth of her skin, knowing she would be revolted by his touch. That knowledge made her following movement perplexing. Her hand brushed closer to his, alighting his fingers in a vibrating energy as the distance between their hands closed. He could feel her heartbeat increase as she leaned against his back, and his own heart likewise threatened to escape from the cage that served as its prison. Time and sound paused in the eternity he spent waiting in anticipation for her next move. A gasp escaped his parted lips as her hand moved again, resting gently on top of his bare hand.

A shiver vibrated down his spine, the bond swelling and pulsing. Her fingers were soft and cool against the heat of his hand, but they did nothing to temper the fire roaring through his veins. The energy radiating off her fingers intoxicated him, but he wasn’t the only one affected. Her breathing against his back was as unsteady as his, though likely not for the same reason. She couldn’t feel the yearning he felt. The mental shields she had constructed around her side of the bond collapsed, a rush of emotions cascaded through their connection, and they were not at all what he had expected.
There was no anger or fear. No hatred. He felt...warmth from her. He felt...regret...forgiveness...compassion...affection.

No...impossible. He rejected the thought from his mind, protecting the delicate emotions stirring inside him. There was a plea, a beseeching tremor in the Force, something begging him to let go of his fear, to let her in. Her warmth enveloped him. It was the light. Was it her light? His light? Their light together? The fear, the darkness, that had gripped him at the thought of letting it in, was eerily silent. He was exhausted from fighting for the sake of fighting, destroying himself in the process. He surrendered to the Force’s will. He let go.

Kylo closed his eyes and savored the sensation of her touch, as the energy from her palm pulsed through him. A halcyon calm settled over his features, his body relaxed as the weight of their hostility lifted, his breathing almost meditative as he reveled in their temporary truce. He could vaguely sense the carefully constructed barriers around his emotions falling away. It left him vulnerable and exposed in truth, a terrifying concept when it concerned a woman he had so much to hide from, but he was unapologetically lost in her touch. The last restraints of his side of the connection opened unconditionally, flooding the bond with every emotion he held toward her. He had anticipated her to recoil from his honesty, but he was jerked with a shock of energy instead.

Kylo instinctively opened his eyes, and the cockpit around him had changed. He knew immediately what it was. He stood to find himself in his training room on the Finalizer, lightsaber ignited. “Mother,” he whispered, sensing her presence. He turned frantically, searching for her, finding a hallway behind him. He knew whatever he sought was down that hallway. He sprinted through the corridor, the light from his weapon illuminating the way. There was nothing in the darkness until he turned a corner and saw a silhouette in the shadows in front of him. His path was suddenly blocked by a crowd, darting chaotically around him. “First Order!” they screamed.

In a break in the crowd, he could see the silhouette in a corner. As he approached, he realized it was Rey. She turned to confront him. “Let us go! You don’t have to do this!” she shouted. She stood before him, tears streaming down her face as she stared at the crackling crimson blade between them. “Goodbye, Rey,” he whispered. He was jolted by the sound of a blaster behind him. He turned to see Poe Dameron, holding a blaster aimed in their direction. “I’ll shoot!” he yelled. Kylo pivoted back toward Rey, but she was gone, and General Hux stood before him instead. “Fire,” he whispered. Kylo glanced down to see shackles gripping his wrists. The room collapsed in upon itself.

He found himself standing on a walkway, a masked Knight standing at the other end with Rey. The Knight extended his hand to her and she accepted it, placing her hand in his. “Stop!” Kylo begged. He moved down the walkway toward them, lightsaber raised. As he stepped between them, forcing her behind him, he heard the crackling hum of an activated lightsaber over his shoulder. He pivoted carefully.
Rey smiled victoriously, wielding a red plasma blade matching his. The blade missed him twice as she thrust it at his abdomen, but his luck was exhausted when it grazed his side. She gasped as he summoned the lightsaber from her, fear and confusion flickering through her eyes. He turned back toward the Knight, and, without hesitation, plunged his lightsaber through the man’s chest. The Knight was still standing before him, staggering backward as he removed the man’s helmet to reveal the face of his father, Han Solo. Kylo stared down at the lightsaber to remove it from where it impaled his father, but as he withdrew it, there was another in its place. When his eyes flickered up again, it was no longer his father’s face staring back at him. It was his own. “You know what you have to do,” he said. “Do it.” Kylo fell back in surprise onto the walkway.

As he sat up, he realized he was in a long corridor on a ship. There was high-pitched electrical screeching around him. He recognized it immediately. It was his ship. Weapons Development. He could hear voices from the room in front of him. “Do it, and I promise, I’ll help you,” Rey murmured.

“You are my greatest disappointment,” a familiar voice, his voice, whispered. A dark figure appeared in the doorway before him, wielding an indigo saberstaff. A blast crashed into his chest, and he reached down instinctively to hold the wound. Luke stepped up from behind him and knelt down next to him. He whispered in Rey’s voice, “Why didn’t you tell me, Ben.” Kylo staggered back in fear, and the floor disappeared underneath him.

He was falling in darkness, he couldn’t see anything, couldn’t hear anything over the wind, couldn’t feel anything until a hand grasped his and pulled him backward. He landed on the top of a sand dune. Darth Vader stood there, overlooking a pit containing a shrieking creature. “I let the entire galaxy suffer,” he rasped, but his voice carried none of the mechanical inhumanity of the helmet’s modulator. Kylo had a lifetime of questions to ask the man, but he was distracted by a young boy’s laugh behind him.

He knew that voice, but when he turned in search, the bright light of the sun blinded him. He shut his eyes, attempting to adjust to the light, but when he opened them, the sand dune and his grandfather were gone. He was standing in a dark room, facing a mirror. Only it was not his own reflection in the mirror, it was his former master’s.

The reflection flickered in the mirror, and the face changed to one he only vaguely recognized – Sidious. “Kill him,” the creature commanded. Rey moved between them, only it wasn’t Rey. At least, not the Rey he knew. She wore his black cowl, her rage permeated the Force around them, and her eyes were black with darkness. In a moment of clarity, he understood that her darkness – her fall – was entirely his fault.

Perhaps it was the shock of the realization that caused him to ignore the warnings in the Force. For the first time in his life, he was surprised by the press of the hilt of a lightsaber to his chest. Trembling with rage, she whispered, “My place will always be right here.” His hand wrapped
around the weapon, struggling for control. With a bright flash of indigo light, Rey disappeared. The high-pitch screeching of the ship returned, and Kylo was left alone with the monster.

Sidious stepped out of the mirror, but the man standing there was Kylo’s near-perfect reflection. The familiar face was only missing a scar. The other man moved his hand, and Kylo looked down at his own as he mimicked the movement. He was holding a familiar pair of dice. His fingers unfurled to drop them, and a spark of blue lightning arced across his palm. There was branching blackness that consumed his hand, but he wasn’t afraid, not anymore.

With a swift manipulation of the Force, his lightsaber leapt into his hand, mirroring the movement of the man facing him. The man turned the hilt in his palm, and Kylo repeated the movement with his own weapon. Kylo knew he wasn’t in control, but he could be. Overriding the desire to ignite the weapon as his reflection had, he flipped the emitter chamber to face himself instead.

“What have you done?” the other man hissed.

“It is my nature,” he answered and ignited the lightsaber.

Kylo jolted violently and grasped at his tunic. Pain radiated across his abdomen. As the scrambling search of his fingers found no wound, he registered the sizzle of electricity to his left. Judging by the concern from the droid, Blue had shocked him out of his vision. The high pitch screeching had not been the ship, but the fearful droid. His eyes darted around frantically as he checked his surroundings. He was on the floor, back in the cockpit of his command shuttle again. And she was gone. He slumped back down to ease his hyperventilating, staring out at the flashes of hyperspace as he contemplated what had just happened.

It was everything he had feared. Kylo had felt her darkness over the bond, at the time he had thought it was in response to him. But what if his darkness was steadily corrupting her over the bond? It was something he had never thoroughly considered before; what if Rey fell to darkness? What if Sidious returned and took Rey as an apprentice? No. He knew that torture. He couldn’t sentence Rey to that life. If the vision was true, then he knew what he had to do to stop him.
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Various acts of threatened violence in a vision

Suicidal ideation

Brief suicidal thoughts from Kylo after he experiences a vision that he wants to prevent
Rey's Vision

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story is 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Rey gasped as she felt his energy ripped from the Force around her.

*What was that!*

She had been sitting quietly, leaning against a tree while attempting to read one of Luke’s ancient Jedi texts when she had felt him. She had expected to see him in front of her. She had prepared herself for his reaction to what had happened between them the last time, but she only felt his warmth against her back. He never spoke a word. He never moved. She had been too exhausted to fight him, deciding that if he was going to ignore her again, then it was better than the alternative.

It had been as if she were still alone, almost, until she had absently put her hand down beside his. Only when she sensed his pulse quicken did she realize how close her fingers were to his. The heat radiated off his hand, and she noticed that he wasn’t wearing his gloves. She wasn’t sure whether it was because of curiosity, loneliness, or longing – or the same compelling magnetism that continued to draw her toward him every moment she was in his presence – but she had made the irrational decision to touch him.

The Force had created a vacuum between them, the tension had eased as her fingers neared his. There was something inside her that felt right, like the last piece of a puzzle clicking into place. It occurred to her then that their connection craved their touch as much as they did. It was part desire and part curiosity when she gently placed her hand over his. She remembered what had happened the last time they had touched, and part of her hoped for more.

She wasn’t disappointed.

His hand was much larger than she remembered but was invitingly warm and calming. Even if there was constant contention between them, she could not deny the comfort of his presence. It was usually infuriating, but she didn’t want to fight him. She knew she could at least block her emotions from him – he had taught her how, after all – but she had chosen not to. She was wary of the conflict, wary of the words she spoke in the comfort of darkness.

He had responded with surprise and confusion to the emotions he had sensed through the bond opened by her touch. The light that she had felt within him in the hut returned, and his radiating
warmth overwhelmed her. She originally felt nothing else from him, but then his emotions suddenly flooded into the bond as well. There was no conflict, or the default anger and fear he usually hid behind. She felt an honest devotion and deep loyalty pass briefly through the bond in the seconds before she was snapped into another vision.

She stood to find herself in a destroyed building, surrounded by stormtroopers. “It’s the girl,” one said. A blaster bolt shot past her head, and she turned abruptly. She found herself with a blaster pointed between her eyes. The aim of the blaster shifted to something behind her. Pivoting back she found her bondmate, his eyes cruel. “Ben...please, don’t do this,” she begged. Another electric snap of a blaster bolt cut through the air in the room, and Kylo tumbled forward into a heap on the ground. Where he had stood, a red-headed man smiled wickedly, holding his own blaster.

She dropped to her knees and rolled Kylo over, igniting his discarded lightsaber and holding it over his face to check for signs of life. “What have I done?” she cried. Kylo’s eyes snapped open, reflecting the crimson light. He grabbed the hilt and jerked the blade closer to himself, burning himself with the quillon of his crossguard saber in the process.

Blood began flowing from his chest. As she grasped his wound, his clothes transformed from his black tunic into a deep red shirt. Desperately trying to stem the bleeding, her efforts were abandoned when he grabbed her hand. Then as quickly as it had come, the blood staining the floor around them was absorbed into his body, and the stains disappeared. He stared at her as if she was a stranger. “Let me go.” When he repeated the sentiment, it was the voice of a child.

Rey was determined to tell him she would never give up on him, on Ben Solo, when two strong arms grabbed her from behind and began dragging her. “I’m going to kill your boyfriend,” the voice whispered. She wrenched herself free, twisting to view her attacker. She fell backward in surprise, onto the floor of the Millennium Falcon. The Zabrak before her wore all black and had tattoos etched into his face. She used the Force to slam him against the wall. But when she lowered her hands, the man crumpled on the ground wore a stormtrooper’s suit. She removed the helmet to reveal Finn’s face. She stood up and noticed the emptiness of the Falcon. “Ben, where are you?” she cried.

She turned in her desperate search, the Falcon fading into a long corridor on a destroyer. Kylo stood before her. He didn’t look quite like Kylo, however. He wasn’t wearing his usual dark clothes and his eyes were... different. Brighter. Kinder. Less angry but still fearful. “Kill him,” a strange voice whispered. She stepped forward with her lightsaber to obey the voice. She surged forward, and so did Kylo. But instead of a blade, she met the soft touch of Kylo’s lips. Her eyes opened as he gasped, and she noticed the blood vessels on his face darkening to black.

She pushed him away and fell onto her back, the destroyer fading away as it began to rain. Kylo had turned away, now standing at the edge of a cliff, staring down at something she couldn’t see. “You should go,” he said. She stood, stepping toward him instead. He pivoted slightly, rain
dripping down his profile as a gust of wind blew the damp hair around his face. “Things will get better now, you’ll see.” She reached for him, and their fingers touched, but the ground fell out from underneath her.

She tumbled through a vast cavern and collapsed into the snow at the bottom. An overwhelming pressure in her chest left her gasping for breath. She struggled against the pressure until she could stand. She found herself in snow, wind whipping the snowflakes falling around her. Masked Knights stood in front of her, their red lightsabers crackling in the darkness. A Knight stepped forward. He offered his hand to her, and she hesitantly reached for him, opening her hand to release two black gems into his palm. They tumbled through his fingers and disappeared.

The unmistakable sound of Kylo’s lightsaber hissed behind her. In the darkness, she saw Finn, Rose, and Chewbacca with blasters raised in his direction. They fired, but the bolts froze mid-air. “Ben!” she screamed. Turning, she found Kylo standing with his lightsaber ignited at his side, illuminated by an orange glow beneath the walkway he was standing upon. His eyes were black and burning with darkness. He took a threatening step toward her, and she lowered her eyes to an unfamiliar lightsaber in her palm.

As she raised her eyes, she realized she was back aboard the Millennium Falcon, staring at a body, covered by a light grey blanket. Her blanket. The edges of the blanket were tucked in reverently, she knew it was someone important to her. She could hear her own apprehensive breathing. “Come back,” she whispered. She slowly walked closer to the body. She reached for the blanket, to reveal the face hidden underneath. She paused as she noticed Finn’s jacket folded next to the body. Gasping for breath, she fell forward and collapsed onto the ground in front of her.

Her lungs sucked in the dirt, and she coughed, pushing herself up off the ground. She realized she was back in the jungle on Barkhesh, and he was gone, the Force ripping his presence back across the galaxy. Her palm burned where she had touched him. A shiver trembled down her back as she gasped for breath.

What was that!
Chapter End Notes

Violence
Threats of ambiguous violence in a vision
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Kylo closed his eyes and breathed in the cool, fresh oxygen from a real planet’s atmosphere. A strong wind whipped his cape and refreshed his senses. There was no artificial gravity, no recycled air, no confining corridors. There were real day and night cycles, weather to encounter, beautiful scenery to witness. The Force was alight with life and energy. There was something unfurling inside him – something that he had believed long dead – that made him feel almost… weightless. Kylo had forgotten how different he felt when he was on-world. He figured it was the most like coming home he would ever feel, if he’d actually had a home in the first place.

The only disappointment, the most significant in his opinion, was this planet was missing the warmth of a sun. Clouds consumed its light, keeping its warmth prisoner. That, and the endless durasteel platforms that suspended the entire civilization above the planet’s aquatic surface. He could never escape durasteel, it seemed. Terrain under his boots was an unnecessary distraction in battle, but in the rare moment where he could appreciate a world for what it was, he craved it. He wished he had been able to feel it again.

Kylo opened his eyes to stare out at what the world had to offer as Blue chirped brightly next to him. The last time he had been on world –unless Starkiller counted as a planet – he had been sharply focused on retrieving the map. He had never had the chance to feel grounded – if only for a moment. And in the great complexity of the universe, as his destiny swiftly advanced upon him, a moment standing on durasteel under the clouds was all he had. It wasn’t perfect, not quite, but it was all he had.

With Sidious in his head, he would never have bothered to partake in the trivial pleasures that being on world had to offer. Monsters didn’t enjoy the beauty of worlds like this; they destroyed them. But he allowed himself, if just for one moment, to pretend there was something more for him out there other than the emptiness of the inside of a destroyer. He had become part of that ship, merely a cog in the war machine he helped create. He had become the mimicking reflection that was under Sidious’ control. He always had been, he always would be, but he refused to live out the rest of his short life in a self-imposed prison of durasteel. With a moment away from the gravity of the war, he contemplated his role in the galaxy, his role in the bond, his vision, and his own existence.

He had only been on world for a few hours, but his mission was complete. The command shuttle loomed before him, mockingly, ready to whisk him back to his responsibilities aboard the Finalizer. The weakness inside him begged not to go back. It begged him to see that there was nothing for him there. Maybe it was right.
If he returned, Hux would continue with his plan for *Force Destiny*, and though he doubted his general could find the Resistance, Sidious could. He couldn't sit by and let them bring his former master back, he couldn't allow him in his head again. Sidious would destroy everything worth living for until he begged for the mercy death. Rey would fall.

*Unless... you’re no longer there,* he thought. Was it his thought? Perhaps it was the darkness or remnants of Sidious’ influence. Perhaps it was the Cosmic Force.

Whatever it was, it was right. If there was no one stopping Hux's ascension to the Throne, then he would never allow Sidious to return. Rey would be safe. Kylo could disappear, fly with Blue to the Unknown Regions, find an inhabitable planet, live in solitude as his uncle had done, let the galaxy live in peace, until he died in insignificance.

*Why wait that long?*

Kylo couldn’t think of a single rebuttal.

“Go get her fired up, Blue,” he said, nudging the droid toward the command shuttle. His voice broke on the droid’s name, and it wasn’t until that moment that he realized how the obnoxious astromech had grown on him. It was more difficult to say goodbye than he expected, so he didn’t. Blue hesitated for a moment, almost as if he could understand the change in his emotions, but he ultimately left, beeping joyfully to himself as he went. The ghosts in his mind were loud, screaming for penance; they demanded a worthless life in exchange for the costly ones he’d taken.

*If you can’t bring your father back, then you don’t deserve to live.*

He walked to the edge of the towering platform he had set his ship down upon, staring out into the vast ocean. The water looked black, mirroring the darkened skies, which chose that moment to open up and empty a heavy downpour upon him. He smirked to himself, wondering if even this world hated him. The entire galaxy hated him, after all.

Of course, it would be rain. He despised the rain. His life almost ended the night his perception of the rain had changed forever. It didn’t, however, and the torrent around him was a reminder – just as it was nearly every time he experienced the skies open above him – that it should have ended. There was a time when he had forgotten his revulsion to the rain, a night he had found himself in a hut by a fire, but even that memory brought him sorrow now. The rain was a reminder of every reason he had made the right decision.
It’s over. Skywalker is dead.

What was the point of fighting? Kylo felt empty, lost, like an integral part of himself was missing, and no matter what he did, nothing could replace it. He was tired of drowning in emotions, struggling against the conflict, fighting against everyone who wanted to kill him. Now that the voices were gone, he didn’t know what was real and what was in his head. Sidious had removed every last part of Ben Solo to create the warrior-puppet of Kylo Ren. Without his master, he was nothing, Sidious had ensured it. The vision had been clear enough of his destiny; he would die, by the hands of a bondmate who had been lost to darkness. Because of him. Sidious would return. What was the point of causing more pain and destruction?

You could end it all, he convinced himself. You could take one more step, that’s all it would take... you can be free. You’ll be free of Sidious forever... The seas will swallow you whole, and the suffering will finally end... You’ll be free of the conflict... and nightmares... and loneliness... and the foolish hope... free of everything...

It will take one second of strength for once in your worthless life... and it could all be over... You will finally sleep... Find peace... There's no reason to fight anymore... You can control your own destiny... your father's murder will be avenged... and Rey will be free of the bond... and safe from you... Maybe she’ll sense it when you’re gone, maybe you’ll finally make her smile.

With his decision made, he felt closer to peace than he had ever felt. It only solidified his determination. The ghosts would have their spiritual compensation. Last words were meaningless when there was no one around to hear them, so he took a steadying breath and stepped off the platform...

Ben! No!

...and felt a hard shove in his chest, forcing him back. His breath was stolen as his back hit the solid platform. He coughed, searching through the rain for that familiar form. He recognized the ethereal voice all too well.

“You can't take this from me too, Luke!” He shouted as he drew in the Force to push himself to his feet, “this is what you wanted!” Staring into the dark abyss, he waited for a response, but the only sound over the crashing waves and pounding rain was his own echo.

As the thrashing of his heart against his ribs eased, part of him felt the overwhelming desire to stagger as far away from the edge as possible, to run back to the command shuttle and tell the droid
what he had nearly done. Blue had a way of forcing him to rethink even his most confidently made decisions. Another, significant part of him craved to choose the fate his uncle had just tried to take from him. It was hypocritical of Luke to stop him, especially after the man had nearly delivered Kylo to that fate himself.

He teetered on the edge in conflict.

It was then that the Force chose to connect them, a gentle tug in his mind and a fading of sound all that preempted her arrival. He was not surprised; the Force always provided someone strong enough to shove him down a path when he was too weak to take the first step himself, or, in this case, the only step. He could hear her steady breathing, but he did not pivot to face her. He maintained his position, precariously straddling the edge of existence. He waited, hoping she would go as he struggled with weakness, yet hoping she would stay so the last images in his head would be of beauty.

He turned his head slightly so she could hear him, but kept his eyes downcast so she couldn’t see the pain in them. A gust of wind swept up from the waves below, tangling through the hair around his face. “You should go.” There must have been something different about his voice, because she stopped short, and he could hear the sharp intake of her breath over the soft patter of rain on the durasteel. “Things will get better now, you’ll see.”

Rey whispered something, but the revelation was clearly not meant for his ears. The only word he could discern over the crashing waves was "real." The darkness was not as heavy as he had felt in her before, but it only reminded him of the future his vision had predicted.

“Where are you?” Rey asked quietly.

He sighed, shaking his head. He had no will left to fight. The edge of the durasteel groaned beneath his boots. The red salt from Crait that was still clumped in the tread – the salt he had refused to scrub clean after his failure against the Resistance – crumbled free in the rain. His eyes followed their fall until the waves devoured them in darkness. “Nowhere near the Resistance,” he assured her distantly, as he closed his eyes to regain the strength. “Please, go.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She was closer, her voice cutting through the muffled patter of rain behind him, and he wondered if she knew the opportunity before her. He wondered if she would do it – push him. “I wouldn’t tell them where you are.”

“Why?”
“Because I still hope you’ll turn,” she whispered, barely audible, but he heard it as though her lips hovered centimeters from his ear.

He hummed. “I’m on Kamino.”

“What business does the First Order have with Kamino?” Her voice was further away, and he realized she had chosen to circle him, as she had on Starkiller, giving him a wide berth.

“Don’t worry, I’m not killing anyone,” he said, tilting his head to hide a weary smirk. He found humor in her conflicting presumptions that he was relentlessly paving a path of death and destruction yet simultaneously capable of turning back to the light. “My general presumes I am here in a political capacity.”

“What are you there for?”

“The Kaminoans have invested considerably in the First Order and, according to my subordinate, preserving their favor requires trivial, superficial discourse and sycophant flattery. I do not have much of a stomach for this dance of predators masquerading as prey. Thankfully, and unbeknownst to my general, that was not the purpose of my brief visit here. I was intrigued by the Kaminoans’ self-described ‘most prodigious achievement’: Clone armies.” He hadn’t realized he had slipped into his carefully articulated political persona, yet another mask he hid behind, until he sensed Rey’s bemusement.

“Sycophant flattery? There’s the pretentious son of a senator I’ve heard so much about.” She bit her lip, bridling the mirth that threatened to reveal itself through a smile. He could feel her smile through the bond, though, and he thought he could die content if it was the last thing he saw. He was graced with a scrunch of her nose instead. He wanted to ask her what she had heard about him but didn’t dare shatter her momentary contentment.

“Leia is a master at such servile pretense; I suppose I am indebted to her that I derived one appropriate application from her extensive time devoted to her ‘illustrious’ career as a Senator, disregarding our family for a legacy of failure and disgrace. I wonder if she’s proud of facilitating the political aptitude of the Supreme Leader. You should be so lucky you were not forced to absorb years of gilded words by the opulent and elitist members of the Senate.” There was a flash of heartbreak in her eyes, and he cursed himself, remembering that Rey never had a choice to be dragged along anywhere with a family. There was no sense in apologizing; apologies were meaningless, the damage was already done.
“Why clones?” she asked, not unkindly. He could sense her in his peripherals, advancing upon the edge of the platform. He nearly reached out for her, until he remembered himself. She was not there with him. Not truly.

“I don’t care for the idea of children growing up without their parents, or my army not having a choice over becoming indoctrinated assassins.” When he sensed her thoughts focus on why he held those convictions, he continued. “Additionally, they’re not prone to breeding dissent and betrayal among their ranks.” His general disagreed vigorously, but that was hardly surprising. He wondered how many troopers would leave if he decreed that they could. He doubted they would. They were Hux’s precious army, after all, not his. Kylo invoked fear, with the Force, but Hux inspired respect. If it came down to Hux or Kylo, they would stand behind Hux.

“And without this clone army, I can’t defeat Hux’s army,” he said, only realizing after he finished that he’d said them aloud. “At least... that was the plan. But perhaps, I don’t care anymore. Perhaps it’s all an exercise in futility.” Rey had continued her arc until she came to rest a few meters in front of him. From his perspective, she was levitating over oblivion. The silence blanketed them like the rain that was soaking him to the bone, weighing him down, dragging him toward the edge.

“What does that mean?” she asked. “That you ‘don’t care anymore.’” Kylo could hear the hope in her voice. It was the one truth she refused to learn; he wouldn’t turn. Still, she did have reason to be hopeful.

“It means... I’ve found a way to end this.” He stared into the abyss below. The wind nipped at the hair around his face, guiding him to its embrace. The rain dripped down his cheeks and into the darkness of oblivion, beckoning him to follow. Perhaps the Force wanted his death. Perhaps it was his destiny to destroy both Luke and Sidious, and the galaxy would only come to balance if he was gone. Their fates were tied. He refused to believe that his destiny was to kill her. He wouldn't do it. Therefore, his destiny must be to die. And if that was his fate, what was the point of delaying the inevitable? Every moment he was alive, since the second he was born, all he had ever done was cause pain.

“End what?” The hope in her voice was gone.

“Talk to me. End what?” He could hear her fear as she spoke, but he felt the profound strength of it in the bond. Could she sense the shadows in his thoughts? “What’s wrong? What are you staring at? Why won’t you look at me?” He refused to raise his eyes from the waves crashing below his feet, knowing that whatever emotion was flickering in her eyes, it would pain him to see it. He was broken, a burden – he only brought pain to everyone he’d ever cared about; the galaxy was better off without him. She'd said it herself.

His indecision was broken by her soft whisper. “What's going on? Did something happen? Where's
Blue?"

“He’s safe, in the command shuttle,” he said, biting back tears. “He'll be fine here. The Kaminoans have the utmost respect for droids.”

“You're scaring me. Where are you going?” she begged as if she cared. Perhaps she did, perhaps she feared what further destruction he would deliver the galaxy.

“Nowhere worth your fear,” he said emotionlessly. “I won’t hurt you, your friends, anyone… not anymore.”

“Please, tell me!” Her fear was still evident enough over the bond, but hadn’t she been listening? She didn’t have to be afraid; it was over. There was no reason to fear him when he was dead. Her fear of him only further convinced him of his inevitable choice. “Please.”

“I’m on the edge of a platform, ninety meters separating me from the water below. I am deciding whether or not to step off this ledge, again. Hopefully this time, Luke won’t stop me. Then I can end both of our suffering, give in to the will of the darkness,” he answered, his voice quiet but strained. He couldn’t decide how he desired for her to react to his words, only that it mattered that she heard the truth. “Now's your chance.”

“That is *not* funny,” she said, her brows pinched in anger as she stepped closer, but he held his ground. He allowed her eyes to find his, which he was certain – when she startled at the sight of them – were as red-rimmed and lifeless as they felt.

“I’m not joking,” he murmured, his voice breaking under the weight of his words. He swallowed apprehensively, holding her gaze, wondering what she would do next – wondering what he wanted her to do next. “Tell me to fall, I'll fall.”

“You don’t mean that.” The words were hollow; she knew the choice he'd made before Luke intervened, he saw it in her eyes. Her face contorted, and he realized she was crying. No matter what he did, he hurt her.

His eyes fell back upon the waves below him, the depths churning with violent power, like the darkness that was swallowing him in conflict. “My entire life has been standing at the edge of a cliff and deciding whether or not to fall, Rey,” he sighed in resignation. “I do mean it.”

“Why? You’re a survivor, like me.”
It was her thoughts of Luke standing over him, lightsaber in hand, that flashed across his mind. “I'm tired of surviving,” he answered. It was honest and vulnerable, not meant for the sharp, bruising tongue of an enemy. But if her wrath pushed him to complete his mission, then so be it.

I'm tired of the thoughts that I'm not positive are my own. I'm tired of reliving everything I've done over and over again in my nightmares. I'm tired of defending myself from...everyone. I'm tired of betrayal. I'm tired of regret. I'm tired of hate...and anger...and fear. I'm tired of being broken. I'm tired of the darkness, and I'm tired of the light. I'm tired of the conflict. I'm tired of never being able to be what I am and never being able to have the one thing I want. I'm tired of being alone. I'm tired of the war and the voices in my head, and I want to be free – of all of it. It would be so easy to end it.

Rey sobbed, and it only deepened his self-hatred. It only strengthened his resolve that removing himself from the bond, the only way he knew how, was the right thing to do. “I understand, I do,” she said, her voice wavering. “I was tired of the life I had on Jakku, but it got better. It could get better for you, too, but not if you take your own life. What do you think that would do to the people who love you?”

His chest rumbled with dark humor. “There's no reason to be concerned with that, Rey. You said it yourself - I'm unlovable, I'm a burden. I have been my entire life. Everyone hates me. My mother hates me. You hate me. I would be doing you and the galaxy a favor if I died, remember? You want this, why does it matter how it happens?”

Her voice was an odd mixture of anger and fear. “I... I didn't mean what I said. I was hurt and angry. I still am, but I don't want you to die, okay? I'm sorry!”

“But you do, that's all you've ever wanted from the moment we first met when you tried to kill me. I don't blame you. If it makes you feel better, this is something I should have considered years ago. I was driven by the mission I had to complete, but that’s… finished. I only now have the strength to do it.” There was a flash of a memory, of her open palm by fire in a hut, and then his in the throne room. His hand still burned in the places on his palm where her hand touched his; it was only strengthened by her rejection. He clenched his fist, resolved.

“I still have hope for you,” she whispered. “What I said before, that wasn't me. You have to believe me. I can't explain it, but those thoughts, they were the darkness.”

As if in response, the dark cast a deeper shadow upon him, calling him, convincing him how easy it would be to take that step. It reminded him of the peace he so desperately sought. “So is this.”
“Please, look at me,” she whispered, closer still. There was a desperation in her words that stoked the conflict in his heart. A new emotion rose above his terminal acceptance. Yearning. Even in the cold rain, he could feel her warmth. His fingers itched to touch her, to feel her skin against his. He needed her, if only for one moment before he accepted his fate.

*I will ruin her. I will drag her down with me. I will make the vision come true.*

“Ben,” she repeated. His eyes met hers obediently. They were wide with fear, but he recognized the difference of this fear. As she stepped closer, he realized that it was not fear of him, it was fear for him, and that concerned him more.

“Did you just call me, ‘Ben?’” He realized it then, how profoundly he missed her saying it.

“That is your real name.”

“It's the name of a dead boy,” he said, but the words were hollow and meaningless.

Rey shook her head as her tears danced with the raindrops. When he continued, his voice was softer. “You haven’t called me by that name since the Supremacy. I thought I would never hear you say it again.” The darkness called him from below, beckoning him to a cruel but just fate, and she gasped sharply. He glanced up to find her face blanched as if she could hear it, or maybe she could sense the raging storm within him subside as the black tendrils of darkness called him.

“Ben?” Her voice trembled as his eyes flickered back to the certain death below him.

*You don’t understand, Rey. This is for you.*

He closed his eyes, memories of her face in that hut by the fire burned into the back of his eyelids. He thought he could do it. He thought his name on her lips would give him the courage to surrender to his darkness, but the warmth that filled him when he heard her voice calling to him was every reason he wanted to remain there with her, if only for a moment longer.

“Ben, please, stay,” she begged, snapping his eyes back to hers in an instant. “Don’t give up hope.” His right eye twitched as he studied her, waiting for her to change her mind, waiting for the cruelty
he knew he deserved. She raised her hand slowly, facing him, hesitantly unfurling her fingers as she reached out. Her fingers were splayed, open toward him in invitation, hovering upright just within reach. His throat bobbed in vulnerability. He was thankful for the rain as he blinked back tears. “You’re not alone, remember?”

_But I am!_ He wanted to scream. _You left me!_ His chest ached with the familiarity of it. He did not remove his glove as he had before, too fearful of the false promises of a vision. His hand dwarfed hers as they pressed together, palm to palm, reflecting each other like opposite sides of a mirror. There was a slow shift in the Force around them, and then the fragile moment shattered.

Her eyes widened as fear spiked through the bond. Reflexively, he grasped onto her hand as she fell away from him. The ground she was standing upon had suddenly disappeared underneath her feet. He lurched forward with the momentum, nearly falling into oblivion over the edge, but he had enough sense to use the Force to propel them both backward. His back hit the wet durasteel, and she fell forward on top of him.

His ankles and feet dangled off the edge, and it had not escaped him that a split-second reaction was the difference between her in his arms and her lost to the waves below, but as she grasped onto him, he realized she was focused on _him_. “Ben!” she cried, burying her face into his shoulder as she clenched her fists into his tunic. Her body trembled as she repeated his name like a chant. Kylo was certain her name escaped his lips with equal relief between uneven breaths. His mind wouldn’t abandon the thought that her hand could have slipped through his fingers, or if he hadn’t pushed backward, she would have joined him in his fate. The worst thought was, what if it was his _touch_ that would have sealed their fate?

He couldn’t see her face, couldn’t think of a word to say to her, but his arms wrapped around her before he could consider the consequences. “You could have died,” she cried. “I was so scared. Don’t you _ever_ do that to me again, okay? Promise me!”

Her words were… confusing… and backward… and everything he was thinking about _her_. In his entire life, in the handful of instances he had felt the gut-wrenching panic over the mortality of another – even that moment in the rain at the temple – he had never been as terrified as he had been in that moment with her. He didn’t matter, but _she_ had almost died. He couldn’t accept that.

His arm spanned across her shoulders as he held her against him… and she allowed it. He closed his eyes and counted _her_ breaths – her proof of life – to center his own breathing. The rain poured in torrents from above, but he didn’t care. Kylo would find a rainforest planet and endure daily rain for the rest of his life if he could feel the warmth of her for one more moment. He was still shaking in terror, but he had never felt so alive. When she spoke again, he felt the words more than heard them. “You didn’t let me fall,” she whispered.
“You won’t fall, that I promise you, Rey,” he replied. “It won’t happen, I won’t let it.” She couldn’t have known that he meant far more than the cliff, but she grasped him tighter as if she had.

“Then you can’t fall,” she reasoned.

He found himself nodding against her without argument, whatever would keep her safe in his arms, he would contemplate the consequences of his promise later. His throat formed the words on its own volition, “I promise.”

Droplets of rain beaded in her hair and trickled onto his cheek. Their chests heaved in unison, perhaps from the near-fall, perhaps from the promises that were made. In that moment, he would promise her anything, and it terrified him. He found himself standing upon an equally precarious cliff, and he was terrified to fall. A bolt of lightning streaked through the clouds and snapped him back to reality.

Panic flooded through the warmth of her embrace. He sat up abruptly, and she quietly slid down next to him. Kylo stared up at the clouds as he wondered how she could so easily make him want to derail everything he had worked for. What was it about her that he couldn’t let go?

“What...happened?” she asked breathlessly, trembling, perhaps from the near fall, or perhaps the chill of the rain. He didn’t dare touch her again. Instead, he slid his knees forward to the edge of the platform and allowed his lower legs to dangle over the waves below. There was a tingle of irritation that traveled up his spine when she shifted forward to sit next to him. He couldn’t find it in him to maintain it, however, as she swung her legs playfully.

“You could fully interact with my environment,” he answered, his eyes focused on the horizon. “The bond is growing stronger, when we touched it was as if you were actually here.” He had expected her to react with hostility at the mention of the bond, but she seemed more disappointed by something else, something she protected tightly behind her barriers. If she was as concerned as he was – or concerned at all for that matter – she did not show it.

“Is that why I could feel the rain?” Her head tilted up to the heavens she could not see.

“What?”

Their bond was stronger, she had nearly fallen to her death. She had been holding onto him. He
was sitting there, wondering what had changed, trying to remember why they were enemies, and she was wondering about rain? His face must have betrayed his flustered confusion, because her tone lightened in amusement.

“Is it still raining?” she asked wistfully. “I love the rain.” Kylo didn’t bother disagreeing with her. If he told her of his resentment toward the rain, he would have to tell her why. Even if it weren’t for the reminder, there was something about the rain that made him hear things that weren’t there. Even now, he could still hear wheezing, dying breaths, the crackle of the fire and his soft cries over the soft ping it made on the durasteel. He remembered the splash sound it made as his boots stepped through each puddle, he remembered the sound of it falling around him as his lightsaber ignited between breaths to take a life. More than that, he remembered the sound of another lightsaber, awakening him from his dreams. The rain had been his witness that night, and it had never let him forget what he’d done. His misery was interrupted as she continued, “You know, the second time we were connected through the Force was the first time I had ever enjoyed the rain.”

“And I ruined it.”

She showed no interest in addressing his self-loathing. “Do you remember?”

He turned to meet her stare. “I asked you why the Force was connecting us,” he answered. He knew the answer to that question was not a simple one. And he knew the answer was a significant piece of his destiny.

“And I called you a monster,” she added. There was something else he felt from her, something achingly similar to regret.

“Yes, you did.”

There was a softness in her gaze that he never thought he would see again. “But then you agreed, and I realized you weren’t the monster I expected.” Until the Supremacy, when you realized I was.

He hummed. Her eyes were less kind those few short weeks ago. He would have given anything back then for her to look at him the way she was presently. But he had not understood the consequences before that were so readily apparent presently. He was wrong; he was a fool to wish for this. If he could take it back, he would make it so she never viewed him as more than a monster, at least then he would have been certain of who he was and what he truly desired. Regardless of his desires, he had to remind himself that she was only being kind because she wanted to turn him. She said so herself.
“I realized your environment could affect me after that connection. You were gone, but the rain on
my face was not,” he remembered. He had hated the sight of it then, but now he ached to share her
world. Monsters, however, didn't belong in her world, they dwelt in the shadows, where creatures
of darkness belong.

“I can feel some droplets, I can sense the rain around me, but not like before. I felt and saw
everything in your world for a moment, it’s because we touched, isn’t it?” Kylo knew Rey’s
attitude toward him had been different since the connection opened, but it was her sudden interest
in the dynamics of the bond that intrigued him the most. She was usually disgusted by the bond,
showing no interest in contemplating its complexities with him. It was almost too good to be true.

“This world – do you want to see it again? All of it?” He asked, only just bridling his excitement as
he gestured to the scenery around him.

“Yes…”

“Take my hand, and I’ll show you,” he said, not quite a demand as much as a plea. “I promise, I
won’t hurt you.” His gloved hand opened on his thigh, palm upward. It was tentative and fearful,
the pain of her last rejection of him still fresh. He continued to stare out at the rolling waves, but
for the first time since he laid eyes upon them, he wasn’t considering joining their depths.

She gently laid her hand in his, but didn’t take it. “I know you won’t hurt me.” The rain and wind
bit at his face and ears, but the warmth that enveloped him when she touched his hand drove the
chill from his body. He immediately regretted not removing his glove. Rey looked out upon the
water in wonder. “I can see it all – the platform, the rain, the waves – how are we doing this?”

“I told you, the bond is growing stronger,” he said distantly, struggling with concentrating on
anything other than the flutter in his chest as her hand rested in his. The heavy downpour had
lightened, he realized, in the last few moments, and the call to the darkness below had faded. He
wondered if the two were coincidental. “When we make physical contact, I can bring you
physically into my environment and you can bring me into yours, as you did in the hut.”

“So what happens next?” Her eyes searched his for the answer, trusting in his knowledge. Kylo
was the Supreme Leader of the First Order; he gave orders daily to several of the thousands of the
personnel on his destroyer daily, yet he couldn’t remember the last time someone looked at him
like his opinion mattered, like he mattered.
“I don’t know,” he answered honestly. “We will be able to affect one another’s environment more and more with every connection, I presume. It will become far more difficult to hide this.” The consequence would be death for him, and what would the Resistance do to her? They wouldn’t try to kill her, would they, as they had tried to do to him?

“Do you still wish you could sever the bond?” she asked gently. Kylo wondered why she thought he had stood on the edge, prepared to fall; the only way he could save her from himself was his own death. The bond would destroy her, one way or another. Did it matter whether he lost her to darkness, imprisonment, or death?

He finally settled on, “Yes, for your sake.” He chose not to counter her question. He knew the horrors she had suffered, yet he believed this bond was the worst thing that ever happened to her. He didn’t need to hear her confirm it.

“What about for your sake?” she pressed. He was uncertain how she would react to his honesty, but in that moment, as her hand rested in his, he was less careful of protecting his vulnerability.

“No, I don’t.”

“Me, neither,” she whispered. He glanced at her, to judge the sincerity of her assertion, and she immediately turned his entire galaxy upside down. Kylo had spent his entire life training to become a pilot and then a senator and then a Jedi and then his grandfather. It had prepared him to become a weapon of war, both on the battlefield and in the political arena. Nothing, however, had prepared him to contend with her smile.

It gutted him, more efficiently than if she had taken his lightsaber and run him through with it. How could something so simple be so instantly destabilizing? So destructive? It was captivating and genuine... and meant only for him. His heart surged in his chest, and his breath caught in his throat. He could feel the pull to the light, the pull to her. He knew he would never be the same after seeing it, after he had been the cause of it. Kylo had seen hundreds of beautiful worlds, with fauna and flora most had only dreamed of, but he had never seen anything as beautiful as her smile.

Rey bit her lips when she noticed him studying her, and his eyes were drawn to them with a magnetism stronger than the most pervasive darkness. She said something, but he was too focused on suppressing his jealousy of the raindrops lucky enough to feel the softness of her lips. Had he ever noticed anyone’s lips like that before? His eyes danced from her lips to her eyes and back again. His clothes felt itchy and too tight, and he could feel every minute movement of her hand. He forgot how to swallow, and he was becoming painfully aware that no amount of training would be capable of contending with the ridiculous flutter in his chest. Realistically, he knew what he wanted, but he knew he shouldn’t. This was Rey. She deserved better than that.
He chewed his words, swallowing them anxiously. He couldn’t tell her the treasonous thoughts that demanded to be spoken, but he knew for the second time since they had developed this connection, something inside him had been irrevocably changed. The darkness inside him screamed for him to run, to destroy, but, not for the first time, those screams were silenced by the part drawn to her. She seemed to sense his inner conflict and turned away to stare at the endless ocean, so he studied her profile instead. “Kamino, huh?”

“Yes, Kamino,” he answered hoarsely. “Do you like it?”

“I do like it,” she said, turning to him with an odd flash of surprise in her eyes. Three things happened simultaneously – her smile widened, her fingers wrapped around his, and Kylo decided he had died when he stepped off that ledge and this was the afterlife. He would have believed it if he thought he deserved an afterlife remotely close to the euphoria he was experiencing presently. “It reminds me of Ahch-To,” she continued. “Takodana was probably my favorite, but I like the water.”

Returning his gaze to the storming skyline, his thoughts returned to the heavy downpour that had lightened since she had taken his hand. It was impossible for their bond to affect the weather, wasn’t it? Part of him couldn’t imagine the power required to create that, but the other part wondered if energy affecting other energy was that fantastical of a concept. “I like that it’s real, here,” he murmured. She turned to him then, and he felt the heat of her stare. There was a puzzlement that bloomed in the bond, but she never gave life to her question. Rey turned her face to the sky before speaking again, and he wondered if she noticed the change in the weather as well.

“What are the Kamino people like?”

“The Kaminoans intrigue me,” he mused, recalling the slender alien species that towered over him. It was a disconcerting experience. With his own height approaching two meters, he was accustomed to towering over others. It reminded him of Snoke, and he hated being reminded of Snoke. If Sidious did reincarnate himself again, Kylo hoped he chose someone less… fear-inducing. “They’re very tall, quiet, and refined. I respect them. The society is efficient, orderly and practical. They have no desire for sentiment or weakness. They have mastered the ability to clone, mass-produce, and train an army – and now they have learned how to accelerate the process. They believe themselves to be superior to humans, and maybe they are. They are more civilized. They do not collapse into anarchy. They do not lower themselves to civil war or slavery. They do not fear the culling of their weak…” Rey turned to him then, horror in her widened eyes. They would have fleeting moments of peace between them, but it was as if she forgot for a time who he truly was. Part of him hated himself for saying too much, for being too truthful again, but another part of him yearned for her to see him for who he was, even if that meant she saw the monster within.
“My contact, Ruan Te, respected me but did not fear me. In fact, none of them were afraid of me. They were even gracious enough to show me their great library. It almost rivals the ones I’ve seen on Coruscant. They gifted me a historical text I was interested in on Force Bonds. Whether or not you agree with their practices, you would like them, I think.”

“Force bonds?”

There was both a warning and a plea from inside him to share the information he had learned. Kylo held his tongue, obeying the warning. He settled on the ambiguous response, “well, one Force Bond anyway, but it interested me because it was not the typical master and apprentice bond.”

Rey glared at him. “And…”

“And?”

“What were their names? Were they Jedi?” she breathed. He could hear the barely concealed excitement in her tone. The problem was, their bond would regress if she heard the story. She would only be disappointed when she realized he couldn’t be what she wanted him to be.

“Their names were Revan and Bastila Shan.” He studied her as carefully as she studied him. It was likely she had found confirmation over the bond that he was hiding something, just as he found confirmation of the hope he had feared would flourish there.

“Were they Jedi?” she repeated.

“It’s not that simple,” he said, knowing that she hoped it was the light within them that had created the bond. “Before I answer, I need you to understand that I’m not like Revan.”

Her smile brightened.

“Rey…”

“Okay, you’re nothing like Revan,” she agreed with a trivial wave of her hand. “Were they Jedi?”
He sighed, cursing himself for digging his own grave. “When they bonded… Bastila was a Jedi and Revan was a Sith.”

Rey bit her lip to temper her exhilaration, but he could hear the laughter bubbling in her throat. He knew if he studied her eyes, he would find blind hope there. There wasn’t a doubt in his mind that it would end poorly. “How did they form their bond?”

“Bastila was sent to capture him, but Revan’s apprentice turned on him during the mission, nearly killing him. She saved his life through Force healing, forging the bond.”

He watched Rey’s eyes bounce back and forth as she trailed the connections she was making in her mind – connections he had hoped she wouldn’t. Kylo couldn’t fault her for her intelligence, something he respected about her. “You said when they formed the bond he was Sith; does that mean…”

Kylo shut his eyes and cursed himself. The rain may have lightened, but the droplets still fell from his drenched hair onto his face, reminding him with their steady beat that he had long ago given himself to the darkness. It didn’t matter the strength of her sudden hope in him. With a long exhale, his stare fell to her hand in his. “Revan was originally a Jedi.”

Please, don’t get this idea in your head. Please don’t make this more complicated than it has to be. Please, don’t try to make me into someone I can’t be.

“Tell me more.”

Kylo hesitated, wondering when she would ask of him the impossible, as his masters and family had. He waited for the moment you can be greater than your grandfather, became you can be greater than Revan. When she said nothing more, he acquiesced, if only to hasten inevitability. “Revan was trained as a Jedi but fell to darkness because he had compassion for the Republic. He disagreed with the lack of intervention by the Jedi Council in the Mandalorian Wars and left with an apprentice to the Unknown Regions. He returned as a Sith and began a Jedi Civil War. After Bastila saved him, his memories were wiped by the Jedi Council…”

“…and he turned back to the light, he became a Jedi again,” she finished.
“Rey –”

“I would never do that to you,” she assured him earnestly. When he did not immediately respond, she tightened her grip on his hand and pulled his hand onto her thigh so he couldn’t turn away. “Ben.” He tilted his head slightly, hesitating a moment before glancing at her. “I would never make you believe you’re someone you’re not. I want you to choose to come home, not force you into it. I would never ask you to sacrifice your memories; that’s cruel. Your memories don’t make you Kylo Ren, they make you Ben Solo. I know you can make the right choice because of who you are.”

“Because of who I am? Maybe you should hear the rest of the story.” Kylo swallowed in apprehension. This was the part of their story that he feared the most. He pulled his hand away from hers as the shadow of darkness passed over his heart. “Bastila was pure light, but she fell to darkness at the hands of Revan’s old apprentice. Ask me why.”

“Ben…”

“Her connection with Revan was an open channel for his darkness to corrupt her. Their bond was responsible for the ease with which it consumed her. Revan was responsible.”

When Rey's eyes finally met his, he saw the understanding finally flicker across them. “What happened to her?” Her voice was abnormally calm, but he sensed her fear. They both knew the darkness she suffered because of him.

His fists clenched at his side. When he imagined Bastila – Jedi warrior, saberstaff in hand – it was Rey’s face that flashed in his mind. His vision warned of her fall, because of him. “She found the light again, but that’s not point.”

“How did she do it?”

Kylo shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

Her eyes insisted that it did matter, tremendously. “Revan saved her,” she said confidently as if she had plucked the truth from his mind. “He brought her back to the light.” She blinked, and renewed hope appeared in her eyes. As if she conjured it from the overwhelming warmth of her light. It was the light he recognized in her, the light he craved. There was little trace of the darkness that surrounded her as of late, but it would be back.
“Revan was *lucky,*” he stressed as his vision replayed on repeat, taunting him with the consequences of the bond. If he were stronger, he would end it. Why was he such a coward? “Revan had enough light in himself to save her. He was never truly a Sith, or a Jedi, light or dark. He was both all and nothing. He was able to command both sides of the Force because he found a balance between them, something I have failed to find my entire life. He fought with the Jedi, and against them. He saved Bastila from a Sith, but the Sith became what they were because of Revan.”

“Jedi, or not, I think he sounds like he made the right choices when it was important,” Rey replied, holding his glare with a smirk. If it was anyone else, he would have said something sharp and derisive to prove his point. But he just wanted her to understand.

“Ah, but Revan and Bastila’s story ended when he left her and their unborn child for the Unknown Regions to keep them safe. She never saw him again, and she never knew why. Do you still feel he made the right choice when it was important? No matter what he was, Jedi or Sith, he still hurt her.”

*And no matter what I do, I will always hurt you.*

His thoughts grew dark, and the call returned. “You’re not like Revan,” she reminded him as if she heard his thought or felt the change in him. His eyes flickered to the darkness calling him; he could barely hear her over the roar of the waves in his head. The darkness was strong as it reached up and wrapped its claws around him again. He could feel her light fading away. This was what she didn't understand – the constant struggle that would never end.

Rey could have made all the assurances in the world, and they would have been lost in the swells of his dark thoughts. Her question was so unexpected, however, that it shattered through the darkness, if only for a moment. “If Revan saved her from darkness, if he left to protect her, does that mean he loved her?”

“Does it matter?” he asked.

“Yes, it does. Even with his darkness, he learned to love her, didn’t he?” Rey rested her hand on his arm. Her energy vibrated through him, and the warmth of her touch centered him. He could barely feel the chill of darkness trickling down his back. It was as if she were the sun itself, driving the darkness to the shadows – not gone, but out of reach. He welcomed the momentary reprieve.

Somehow, he felt he was answering a question of far greater consequence. *I wouldn’t know what love is. “I don’t know.”*
“And if it hurt her when he abandoned her,” she reasoned, “does that mean she loved him too, darkness and all?”

Kylo pulled a thin text and a Jogan fruit from a pocket inside his cloak. “Here, take it, I’ve read enough.” Rey reached for the text first, and it transferred to her hand as if she had actually been there, sitting next to him. Rey traced over the tangible evidence of their bond with her fingers, understanding the consequences as he did. He dropped the fruit on top of the text, hoping she wouldn’t mention it. Her eyes raised to his face and she smiled again. As fear grew in the pit of his stomach, her light burned across the bond.

**Does that mean she loved him too, darkness and all?**

Her words chiseled away at the fortress he had built around himself. Revan was a monster, like Kylo. No one could love a monster. He should have allowed the conversation to die, but he couldn’t escape the tormenting thoughts. “I think... she loved who she thought he was. Or who he was when their ideals aligned.”

“I think she loved him, the good and the bad,” she replied, thumbing through the pages. “Maybe she loved him before they ever met. That’s why, even when he was her enemy, she wouldn’t let him die.”

“Destiny then?” Tilting his head slightly, he waited for her stare to find his as the skies darkened above them. “You believe the Force condemned their love to a tragic fate?”

“I believe any love is a better fate than no love at all.”

Rey refused to yield, but neither would he. “You? The girl abandoned by her parents for drinking money, believes the Force was just in taking away everything he… everything she had ever loved?” Kylo pushed away the thoughts revolving around his mistake, because that was all it was – a mistake, an error, a meaningless slip. What wasn’t meaningless was the tear that she blinked away. It made it undeniably clear that his words had been cruel, but it was the truth. She stared at him with the same pained eyes as when he had explained – at least in part – what had happened to her parents. He knew his penchant for the truth could be hurtful, but what did she want from him, a lie?

“They still love you, Ben; they want you to come home.” She could have walked away from him, slapped him, or said something as equally cruel, and he would have deserved it. But nothing was as
painful as the words she had chosen. They both were quiet as they battled the ghosts of their past. When she spoke again, she took mercy on him. “Was Revan able to break it? The bond? Is that why they never saw each other again?”

“I wish I knew.”

“...so that you could do it to our bond too,” she realized. “That is what all of this is about. You’re not afraid I’ll mistakenly find similarities between you and Revan. You’re afraid of becoming him. But don’t you understand? Abandoning our bond is how you become him, Ben.”

“A few days ago, you wanted to kill me,” he snapped. “I am trying to protect you, Rey. You don’t understand, I will destroy you.”

“No, you won’t,” she said with a naïve certainty.

“You’re so sure.”

“I have hope,” she said. He was certain she was smiling, but he refused to confirm it, not when he knew it would erode his resolve. “What do we have without hope?”

“Hope is the absence of reason, Rey.” He knew all about hope and the disappointment when he saw life for what it was. “We are connected by destiny – I will destroy you, or you will destroy me.”

“I will destroy Kylo Ren, not you, Ben.”

Kylo couldn’t remember his retort when she grasped his gloved hand again. His eyes searched hers for intention, as he struggled internally for a strength he knew he did not possess. Every sense of self-preservation inside him, which admittedly was quite lacking at the moment, screamed danger. His intuition beseeched him to run away from her before he lost himself.

“Ben, can you promise me something?”

“It depends, I don’t make or take promises lightly,” he murmured distractedly, his eyes focused on
her hand in his.

“Promise me you won’t die.”

Kylo bit back something close to a laugh and turned away so she wouldn’t see his smirk. “I can’t do that. I am mortal, Rey. With the relatively short lifespan of a human,” his voice was carried by the rain, but he knew she heard him. “It is the only certainty in this life.” Except, death wasn’t as certain as he had once believed. At least, not the permanence of it. Death was only a temporary inconvenience to someone like Sidious. Kylo didn’t understand the draw of immortality. Why would someone willingly subject themselves to more than one lifetime of torture? Nearly thirty years had been long enough to understand that one’s legacy was all that mattered. His destiny had already been decided for him, and with it, his legacy. What was the point?

“Fine, promise me you won’t die... soon.” Even through the downpour, he could hear her voice heavy with tears. It pained him. She was worming her way into a place deep inside him that he protected over everything else. He refused to allow the devastation of rejection by anyone ever again. But there she was, threatening to break through with little resistance. If he allowed her in, she would destroy him, in much more devastating ways than a scratch across the face. And that he could not allow.

“We’re in a war, where your friends – including my own mother – are actively trying to kill me. It is a very real possibility. An inevitability, really,” he reasoned, knowing it was not the answer she was hoping for, but it was a far better answer than he could have given her. He dreamed only of peace for as long as he could remember, and after killing his father and Sidious, he realized death was the lone way he would ever find it. “Regardless,” he continued. “I have little if any control over the Force’s will. You can’t ask me to promise that.”

“Ben, please! Five minutes ago, you were…” she jerked her hand from his to cover a broken sob. He pressed his hand into the durasteel platform to ground himself instead. “You were going to jump into that ocean and leave me!” Kylo could have argued that he wouldn’t have been leaving her, because she had refused to join him, but he let it die. Her fear for his life was as raw and tangible as if he had felt it himself. And he had felt that before. It didn’t end the way he had hoped. He wouldn’t knowingly do that to her, even if he didn’t understand why she felt that way. “Give me an honest answer.”

“Then ask me an honest question.”

“Will you promise me that you will fight to stay alive? That you won’t take fate into your own hands?” Her bright hazel eyes implored him, and he wished he could promise her everything she ever wanted. The rain was drumming off the durasteel around them, overwhelming them with vibrations in the Force. He may not have heard the next words themselves, but he felt them through
the bond. “Please, Ben.”

“I promise I won’t step off that ledge today. If you understood the darkness inside me, you would know that is the best I can do,” he answered honestly. His eyes wandered to the violence of the crashing waves below them. He wondered why he was born this way. Too much light, too much darkness. No matter what it was he wanted, his weakness always held him back.

“I don’t want to lose you, Ben. I refuse to give up hope,” she said, resting her hand on his to draw his attention. “You can come back, it’s not too late.”

He exhaled a shuddered breath as she stared up at him with something in her eyes that he couldn’t name. “I –”

“Supreme Leader.” Kylo jolted when his comlink snapped him back to reality. Rey let her hand fall away as he moved to stand. They both felt it then – a deviation in the Force. He had felt it first on Starkiller. He understood it the moment he had been thrown backward by the Force in the throne room. It felt like alternate futures diverged from one fixed point. He knew then, he had missed something important, only he didn’t understand what it was.

“General,” he replied hoarsely, pivoting away from her so he did not have to further witness the disappointment falling on her face.

“I trust your visit to Kamino was a success?” Hux’s voice sounded almost mocking. As if he knew the consequence of what he had just interrupted.

“It was uneventful.” Rey looked away as the words left his tongue. He sensed a spike of sharpness to her side of the bond. He hadn’t meant it like that.

“Yes, well, there are urgent matters that require your attention.”

“One moment, General.” He knew Rey was pulling away from him; he was losing her again. His path before him was clear. He would return to the First Order and do everything in his power to fulfill his destiny and prevent the vision from being realized. If that failed–when that failed–he would enact the insurances he had created. Then he would let the pieces fall where they may. But he needed help, and there was no one he trusted other than his supposed enemy. Crouching down next to her, he unclipped a small, clear container from his belt and held it out to her.
“Rey, I need you to take this.”

“What is it?” Her hand hesitated over his open palm as she narrowed her eyes with suspicion. He wished for once she would trust him.

“The Blue Shadow Virus – modified with the clone’s DNA,” he said, dipping his head to better read her expression. “It will kill them all.”

Judging by the concern in her eyes, she understood the gravity of his request. It was significant because, if she chose to betray him to the Resistance, he would have nothing to stop Hux’s army. He was trusting her with his life. “Why?”

“Insurance.” Turning his hand over, he placed the vial in her palm when she did not take it. He wrapped his hand around hers and physically enclosed her fingers around the vial. “When – If the Resistance, or the First Order,” he paused, selecting his words carefully, “dethrones me, then you can destroy it all.”

“Ben...”

“Promise me,” he said. It more of a plea than a demand. He knew there was more she wanted to say; he knew that she was deeply conflicted, because the reality of the victory she was committing to would only be realized upon his death. He knew it would be a struggle for her to keep the secret that would end a war. All he could do was trust that she would.

“I promise,” she whispered. “Now promise me you’ll turn.”

“Rey...”

“You want to leave, that’s why you gave this to me,” she said, lifting the vial, “This is your first step, Ben, but I can’t do this for you. I can’t save you, no one can, you have to choose to leave.”

“No one can save me,’ that’s funny, because they sure as hell were the ones destroy me in the first place.” Kylo sighed when her stare dropped from his. “You’re right,” he said as he stood from where he had crouched. “You can’t save me. I haven’t left, because I don’t want to leave.” Rey didn’t respond, which was likely for the best.
Turning from her again, he focused his attention on the comlink. “Go ahead, Hux,”

“There is civil unrest on Mandalore. Transmissions suggest the attacks originated from its moon Concordia. The Mandalorians and their allies have pledged allegiance to the First Order if our armies quell the insurgency, sir. We also received communications from our troops on Felucia, there has been an uprising at the Nysillin factory there. Furthermore, we have lost comms with one of our supply freighters, intel believes it was attacked by pirates just off Taris. And bounty hunters on Lehon have suggested there may be a Resistance base out there.” He turned to Rey; her face had hardened at the reality that was war.

“I suppose it’s time to go bring order to the galaxy,” he told her. He could see the pensive sadness in her eyes. Her lips parted in response, but she swallowed her words. He was grateful. He nodded a goodbye and walked back to the shuttle.

“Send full ground support to Felucia,” he ordered his general. He knew it was unwise to divulge sensitive information around his bondmate, but he already trusted her with what could be could be the Resistance’s greatest weapon, as well as his life. He might as well trust that she would not share the whereabouts of the First Order with the rebellion. If they wanted to emerge from the rock they had crawled under, then so be it. It would make it easier to eliminate them.

“A company would suffice, but send a battalion with riot control troopers. Make a statement. The uprising must be crushed swiftly before the commodity is destroyed. Send air support to Taris. If you have failed to raise the freighter on comms, it is likely lost. You know what to do, there will be no pursuit or negotiation. If there is a Resistance stronghold on Lehon, the bounty hunters will tend to it. No sense spreading the fleet too thin. I will rendezvous with the Finalizer off Concordia.”

“Yes, Supreme Leader.” He paused as he reached the boarding ramp for his command shuttle, turning to glance at the woman he was leaving behind. With the rain pouring around her, he would have never known she was crying, but the rueful vibrations in the bond convinced him otherwise. He almost went back to her, almost pulled her into his arms, almost promised to find her – promised to be everything she wanted him to be. Almost. Instead, he disappeared up the ramp without a second glance, severing the connection.
Suicidal ideation and attempt

Kylo battles with his own darkness and nearly loses that fight without intervention from the Force. If this is a trigger, it would be better to message me for an overview as it's prevalent throughout the chapter.
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Rey looked down through tears at the text and vial in her hands. When she glanced back up, Kylo and his shuttle had disappeared, the last remnants of the connection dissipating into the Force. Her entire body trembled from the myriad of emotions that raged inside her. Standing from where she sat on her makeshift bed, she considered her next choice carefully.

“What... just... happened?” she asked the room. When the Force had connected them, she had been immediately overwhelmed by his misery and self-loathing. The whispers urged her to trust her initial desire to further his pain; hurt him the way he had hurt her. Revenge, the whispers persuaded her. He deserved it all for making her believe their experience in the hut was real. But as he stood in front of her, something deep inside her warned her that he was in danger; it begged her to investigate the alarm her intuition raised. Rey would be forever thankful she had. As she agonized over the unanticipated, no, fate-altering moments that transpired between them, she found herself distrusting the whispers for the first time.

If she had said the horrible things she had originally considered, he would have jumped. Why would the Force connect them when he had already planned to... die? If they weren’t connected, the whispers would have gotten what they wanted. The only reason he lived long enough for her to intervene was because of Luke. Rey was brought to him to stop him; she trusted that.

If he had died, the Resistance would have had no weapon against the First Order. He had given her the secret to defeating them. How was she supposed to reconcile that with the whispers? Was it not the Force’s will to save the Resistance? To save him? In the short span she had known him, the Force had saved him more times than she could count. There had to be reason for that. She believed with everything in her that the Force wanted him to live. She felt his light. He wanted to do the right thing, even if he didn’t know it yet. The whispers, however, clearly wanted them enemies. They wanted him dead. It didn’t make sense.

But then, what did make sense anymore? Kylo was her enemy; she should have had no compassion left for him. When they were first connected, she had no idea he held the key to saving the galaxy. She should have wanted him dead, not been terrified at the thought of losing him. Yet she had never been more terrified in her life. She shouldn’t have cared that he returned to the First Order. Yet she was heartbroken all over again. She should have immediately handed the vial over to the Resistance without question. Yet she hadn’t. Why? Why did she care?

Not only had she not taken the opportunity to kill him as anyone else would have – as Finn had discussed with her – but she had held his hand. She had had felt a warmth toward him that she had never felt with anyone else. Kylo Ren. Their enemy. Why did she feel so differently when they were together? It must have been the darkness tempting her, because she couldn’t.... she wouldn’t... make the mistake again of believing he cared for her, even if everything in her was begging her to pay attention to his actions, not his words.
It didn’t matter, because even if he did care, he was still her enemy. Would he turn? Could he save himself? She believed that if there was a Cosmic Force – a hope – then he had to; it was the only thing that made sense. He gave her the vial to destroy the clones – to end the First Order. Why else would he do that, unless he wanted to leave? She saw his face when she told him his family still wanted him. He yearned to come home. But until then, what would she do?

Kylo trusted her to keep the most important secret there could possibly be from the Resistance. If she gave them that vial, it could end the war. But it would mean betraying him and sealing his fate. Was it wrong to have hope that he would do the right thing? Or was it wrong to continue to let thousands die to save the life of one man? Even if – as deeply as she didn’t want it to – his life meant more to her than she could ever explain? In war, was there ever any right choice?
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Blue beeped and whirred with questions from his position next to him as Kylo focused on the controls of the command shuttle. There was a succession of warning beeps from the
"Congratulations, General; only you can make that title sound so repulsive," Kylo sneered, "I thought I made it clear I had set course to Concordia. Could this not wait until then? You’re disturbing an otherwise peaceful jump."

"Be that as it may," Hux drawled, trying to control his own caviling tone, “the First Order has pressing matters that require your attention. I was informed that you wanted immediate knowledge of any new information on the Resistance, and, considering your ridiculous refusal to be accompanied by any other crew members on your mission, you are the only one to whom I can relay this information." He glared at Kylo. He knew he had him. Kylo sighed and leaned back in his chair with splayed hands.

"What is so important?"

"Intelligence has narrowed down the location to several likely planets on the outer rim. Each contains bases that could potentially harbor the Resistance. As you Force users have some...connection... can you wave your hand or meditate or something equally non-violent and see if she is located on one of these planets?"

Kylo searched his subordinate's face for the twitch of a mocking expression to no avail. Unfortunately, the general was serious. *Does he have any idea how the Force works?* This was all an exercise in futility, of course, because he already knew which planet the Resistance had found as a temporary base. Kylo opened his own holopad, locating the document from the general. With the modicum of feigned interest he could muster, Kylo sifted through the projected planets.

"Tatooine...is Vader and Skywalker's home planet, but it's an inhospitable desert with no hideout, little resources, and unfriendly inhabitants who would turn them over to us if they didn't kill them first."

“Kashyyyk...” he continued, “is even less likely. The Wookiee would not be foolish enough to bring them there. It's directly on a major navigational route, and the *Millennium Falcon* would undoubtedly be recognized around those parts, as it was instrumental in their liberation.”

“Arbra would be an excellent hideout, but the Rebel Alliance was unable to make the planet a base due to the invasive, energy-consuming behaviors of the native species. *I won't step foot on that forsaken planet, General; I highly doubt Leia Organa would risk the lives of her few remaining members on such a formidable place.*"
“Barkhesh... ” His pulse quickened. He had figured the planet they selected was a relatively good choice. It was sparsely inhabited, and the rainforests provided excellent cover. He considered his options hastily. He had to direct them away from that world... away from Rey. But if he lied, to help the Resistance, no less, it was treason.

"Barkhesh has a native insectoid species that colonized the planet. One bite contains enough venom to kill their entire group. They are not foolish enough to step foot on that planet, and, if they were, they're long gone by now."

“And Hoth... Hoth was a Rebel stronghold during the Imperial war. Their general was based there with the Rebellion. Without supplies, they would not last long in those temperatures, but if I had to choose, I would focus efforts there, as it is the most likely of the possibilities you provided me.” Hux stared at him expectantly, and he sighed. He waved his hand over the Holo mystically, pressing his lips together to suppress a smirk. “I can't sense a variance in the Force from her presence on any of these planets. The intel your troops have gathered is disappointing, General.” He closed the holopad with disinterest, hoping his performance had been believable enough. It was clear they were closing in on Barkhesh. When he returned, he would have to use Force persuasion to implement a fail-safe at the bridge.

He could leave a suggestion with Peavey to divert from any course to the Seitia sector, but Hux would immediately become suspicious by the change of course. He could leave a suggestion instead for Peavey to respond to any order of change of course to Barkhesh with the assertion that they were already on course to Barkhesh. It would give him deniability with Hux. If he left a suggestion with Peavey to contact him with every order for a change, of course, it would give him time – something that had become increasingly more pressing.

It was inevitable that their hideout – or the members themselves – would be discovered, but with enough warning, he could ensure Rey’s safety before the First Order was within range. She could hate him, but he wouldn't be the reason for her death. It was the only move he had. Until then, he would do everything in his power to buy more time. “Find me another planet – the right one. I assume your troops have not found the Corellian light freighter?”

"No... Supreme Leader, but they will," the general intoned.

The general was right. He needed to buy time. If there was a distraction – a significant one – then perhaps it would give him enough time to access the central computers. After his mission on Kamino, Kylo thought of the perfect distraction. He raised a Commander Halden in Weapon Controls on the hypertranceiver.
“Yes, my lord?” the man said hesitantly.

“Run a weapon’s test on the abandoned base on Arkanis.”

A grin grew on the commander’s face. “Yes, sir. And the weapon?”

“Impress me.”
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See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Leia handed Lieutenant Connix a sheet of paper on which she had personally written a list of eleventh-hour contacts that had been sympathetic to the Rebellion. The Resistance was depleted in every sense of the word. Leia knew if the First Order found them, they would not be so lucky again. Her son had been distracted by his anger toward Luke. She had never known her son to make the same mistake twice. Without the New Republic, the powerful and influential names on that list were their only hope, in their most desperate hour, of forming an alliance large enough to defeat the First Order. Connix smiled at the ailing general, but it didn’t reach her eyes. She left the room without another word. Poe nodded as he passed her on his way into the room. He noticed the tears in her eyes.

“Good morning General,” he said. “You asked to see me?”

“Yes, Colonel, please sit,” she replied, grasping his hand between her trembling fingers. She may have appeared strong to everyone else, but he could see the small signs that everyone else missed. Perhaps watching his own mother slowly die had left him more perceptive to it. “There’s no need for nonsense; I’ll just come out and say it. I’ve seen the look in your eyes the last few days, so I’m not going to pretend you do not suspect what I am about to say.” Poe ran his hand through his hair and released a long exhale in preparation. As difficult as it was to hear, he admired that, even in failing health, Leia was still no pretense, no quibble, no nonsense.

“I’m dying –”

Poe nodded, blinking rapidly as emotions swelled in his eyes. He knew it was coming – had suspected it since she ended her treatment early on the Raddus against the recommendation of every medical professional onboard – but it didn’t make receiving the news any easier. “Leia… General, I –”

“Save your sorrow for after the fight,” she said, patting his hand. “There are more important matters to attend to.”

“I can’t just sit here pretend –”

“I have thought long and hard – after what happened aboard the Raddus and on Crait – about who
could best carry on the legacy of the Resistance. I think you’re ready.”

“General?”

“Dameron, you have heart. You don’t always make the wisest choices, but you learn from your mistakes, and that’s an important quality to have. The decisions you make, good or bad, are always with the best interests of the Resistance in mind. You are a natural leader; these people will follow you. You give them hope, even when there is none. The time is nearing to make a stand against the First Order, and your propensity to blow things up might be exactly what the Resistance needs. You were the one who made the deal with – unsavory characters – to find Lor San Tekka and retrieve the map to my brother before the First Order. These people trust you. They’ll need you in the darkness to come. I have thought long and hard, and I believe you’re ready to carry on the legacy of the Resistance.”

“I... don’t know what to say,” he answered hoarsely. It was something he had always wanted, something he had worked his entire life to achieve, but not like this. The others wouldn’t see a single tear, of course, but it would be all he thought about as the terrible nightmares of his interrogation kept him awake at night.

“Well, now is not the time to be humble,” she chuckled. “There’s no time for sentimentality. The war won’t wait for grief. We need to start the transition immediately.” With that she moved to stand, as if she had been delivering any other news. The woman weathered insurmountable grief with a practiced ease to the lay observer, but Poe knew she was a fortress of secrets. He wondered if this moment was as insignificant as she made it appear, or if she had just become an expert at hiding it.

“I promise,” he squeezed her hand firmly, stopping her from leaving in hope to share her burden, if only for a moment. “I will never give up hope. We will never give up your fight against tyranny. I will carry on your legacy –”

“Save the grandstanding until you address the others,” she said with a wry smirk.

Poe huffed something between a chuckle and a sob. “And I will try to make you proud in everything that I do. You are like a second mother to me.” He cleared his throat to suppress the tears that were threatening to break free. Leia patted his hand gently before pulling away.

“I know you’ll make me proud, just as you’ve made Shara and Kes proud,” she said. There was a softness in her eyes for a brief moment before she straightened and became the general once more. “Now, for our first order of business, you know who we need to contact for help. He will want
something in return, but you have established a rapport with him. Let him name his price. If he helps destroy the First Order, he can have whatever he wants, as long as it does not further endanger this galaxy. I wouldn't be suggesting this if we had any other options. But he helped us before, and he could be persuaded to help us again.”

“General...” Poe began, but she raised a hand in anticipation of his argument. He bit his tongue in deference.

“And, please, do not risk the safety of the Resistance with a funeral. You know how I feel about making a fuss,” she grumbled.

“Yes, ma’am,” he teased. “Any other... requests?” Her lips edged in a smile, but sorrow passed over her eyes.

“Watch out for our resident Jedi for me,” she said, and there was something there. Something... clandestine and almost fearful. “She is struggling with things even I can’t understand, and I am sensitive to the Force. I fear the toll that war will take on her.”

Poe nodded, choosing not to address his suspicions without evidence. Leia didn’t need more concerns to weather, especially not ones involving her son and the "last hope" of the Resistance. “Did you get answers from Rey about the bounty?” he asked instead.

Leia shook her head, stifling a coughing fit as best she could. “Give her time. She is scared. This is all new to her. I know she has had a difficult time with everything that has happened with Ben...”

Poe knew the monster was her child, but the name added fuel to the rage already burning inside him. He knew she still had hope for saving him, but the war wouldn’t be over for him until he put a blaster bolt between Kylo Ren’s eyes. “Leia, about your son...”

She interrupted him with another wave of her hand. “I believe there is still light left in Ben,” she said wistfully. “But I also know now that the only person who can save Ben, is Ben, and he has made it clear that he doesn’t want to be saved. I trust that you will do what’s best for the galaxy, no matter what fate is dealt to my son. And, realistically, I know that my son will never come home, but if he does find his way, if my dying wish is granted, please tell him I never stopped loving him and I am sorry I failed him.”

Poe didn’t think it was possible to hate Kylo Ren more than he already did, but he was wrong. That
sullen, antisocial, goofy-looking boy had had everything. He could have become anything he
wanted to be, but he betrayed them all. His mother – after he *murdered* her friends, her husband,
and her brother – forgave him and still wanted him to come home. She was *dying* because of what
he had done, but he wouldn’t shed a single tear for her. Poe *hated* him; more than Snoke, or the
Emporer, or the pasty general responsible for Hosnian Prime. They were all monsters, but Kylo
hadn’t been born one. Leia was a daily reminder that he had *chosen* his path. Tears formed in the
corners of Poe’s eyes, which he quickly wiped away with a pinch of his fingers.

“Of course,” he promised, knowing he owed the woman that much. “Of course.”

“Alright, no more tears; we have a busy day of transitioning ahead of us. And *you* have holocall to
make,” she said dryly. He squeezed her hand, composed himself and stood to leave. When he
reached the entryway, he paused.

“Can I ask you a question about the Force?” he asked, doing his best to sound more casual than
curious. She nodded. “What Luke did, projecting his image across the galaxy, is that a common
Force power? Have you ever seen – I don’t know – your son do that?”

“No, that would require an effort too great for even Ben,” she sighed. “Ben is many things, but he’s
not foolish. You know what sacrifices my brother made to do that. Ben’s training as a Jedi was
extensive. He knows the consequences. Luke had little energy to spare, using his strength to
project him across lightyears. Even if it were possible for Ben to achieve, he would be of little
danger to you with the power it requires to sustain. I wouldn’t worry too much about it.”

“What about the connection between you and Luke? I know you could talk to each other,” he
asked, staring at his boot as he scuffed it in the red soil. “Why didn't Luke use that?”

Exhaustion drained the strength in her voice, but he refused to look up. He feared the suspicion she
would see in his eyes. “We could hear each other, sense each other, but I could never see him
projected into the room with me, not like what you observed on Crait.”

“But do you think it’s possible, between two very powerful Force users?”

“I suppose anything is possible, though I have never heard of it. It would have to be strong if even
the bond between twins was not strong enough to be capable of such feats,” she replied, hesitating
for a moment as she considered the source of his questions. “Why?”
“Excuse me, Princess... General,” the protocol droid interrupted. “Miss Rey is here to see you.”

“Yes, one moment, Threepio,” she said, turning back to her colonel.

“I was only curious; don’t worry about it,” Poe said casually and stepped out into the corridor.

She sighed. “Whenever you say ‘don’t worry about it,’ I know it’s something I most definitely need to worry about.”
Chapter End Notes

Mention of Leia's impending death
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Kylo waited just outside Mandalore airspace for his general to update him on the hypertransceiver. He closed his eyes as he tried to focus on the mission. These were the moments that made him feel alive, but, for the first time, he didn't want to be there.

Battle was what he had been trained for; it was what he did best. Bloodlust drove his strength and power in the darkness. He felt at home on a battlefield. The whispers, the memories, the ever-present ache in his chest faded away to the images, sounds and smells of battle. It grounded him; the ghosts faded, and his mind was forced to remain in the present. When he threw himself into battle, it became his sole purpose. What happened before and what would happen after meant nothing.

All that mattered was that one battle, that one opponent, that one strike. In the absence of deeper meditation, it was the closest imitation of peace he had experienced. The battlefield was the only place where the galaxy made sense. It was a simple dichotomy; the battle was either won or lost, they were either with him or against him, it was either kill or be killed. Simple. Emotions were simple, people's intentions were simple, consequences were simple. There had never been a moment he hesitated to step out onto the battlefield, until that very moment. It had little to do with the battle itself. His mind wasn't in it – it was thousands of lightyears away. It was further proof of his weakness.

“Supreme Leader.”

Kylo was grateful for the distraction. The man may have irritated him to no end on a regular basis, but in strategical preparations, Hux was an asset. “General, I’ve been awaiting your update.”

“Intelligence on-world indicates that the troops have sufficiently quelled the battle on Mandalore and do not require assistance. I will oversee the completion of that end from the bridge,” Hux said in a commanding way that would have irritated him to an aggressive reaction if it had been any other day. He didn’t have it in him to care. “Your… expertise is required to assist with the prisoners on Concordia.”

Kylo could feel Blue studying him. He was a curious little droid, and Kylo knew there would be questions following the conversation with his general. Unfortunately, those questions didn’t have an easy answer. He knew he wouldn’t have wanted to answer Rey’s questions either if she had been there. His eyes never left the hologram of his general to avoid that entire line of thinking.
“What’s to assist? You know what to do.”

“Not yet,” Hux drawled, clearing his throat. “Several key prisoners require your – alternative methods – of gathering the intel we need.”

He knew the answer to his question before he asked. It was an inevitability. For all its vastness, the galaxy was well-populated, and the First Order had friends throughout. Someone was bound to know something. He had only hoped it would take longer. “What intel?”

“The location of the Resistance,” Hux said, his eyes alight with brutal promise.

Kylo looked away, fearing what his own eyes would reveal as he stared out at the barren landscape of the grey moon. “And why should we believe them?”

“The tribe broke decades of silence on the Concordia – a silence so extensive they were believed to be extinct – to attack Mandalore in an attempt to gain access to their lightspeed-capable ships. They were planning to collect the bounties themselves.” Hux’s voice was calm and collected. He was being patient with him. Too patient.

What does he want? What does he know?

Kylo pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. “Is the uprising suppressed on Concordia?”

“Yes, the prisoners are in custody, however, they are refusing to cooperate.”

Blue began fidgeting next to him, and Kylo knew he was listening intently. He glanced at the little droid, selecting his next words carefully. “Then I will assist in gaining their cooperation.”

“Yes, Supreme Leader.” Hux’s hologram faded from the hypertransciever. Blue had been silent as he listened to the conversation until the general was gone. He beeped hesitantly at Kylo as he prepared the command shuttle for landing on Concordia. Kylo sighed in response, but the droid only asked his question again.

“Assisting in their cooperation? You know what it means,” he deflected, but the droid was
insistent, echoing its question for a third time. “It means... I'll make them tell me what I want them to tell me.” Kylo knew the droid wouldn't let it go; he was smart, inquisitive and interested in how the universe worked. He knew Blue would ask him how. It shouldn't have made him cringe when he did. Yet, there was something about explaining it, as he would to a small child, that made the truth sound worse than when he justified it to himself.

“I'm going to... hurt them... to make them tell me what they know. If they know the location of the Resistance, then I... I can’t let them live with that knowledge. Do you understand?”

The droid's next series of beeps were low and mournful. “I don't know,” he whispered. “Because I have to.” The droid did not accept his answer, however, continuing his barrage of questions instead. “I don't have a reason for why I hurt people that you would understand, Blue. It’s war. I told you I'm not a good person. I must do this.”

Blue's response was juvenile and sarcastic. Kylo never imagined he would tolerate anyone speaking to him like that, but, then again, he had done a lot lately that he had never imagined doing before. It pained him more than he was willing to admit that even the droid was disappointed in him. He exhaled a long-suffering breath to control his irritation. “No, it's not for the First Order.” It was the truth. This time, these prisoners, were worth more to the Order alive than dead. And he would kill them.

What Blue said next surprised him, and he turned in his seat to stare at the little droid – who was clearly more perceptive than he’d thought. Kylo had every reason not to tell the droid the truth, but he found himself telling him anyway. “Yes, Blue, it's to protect the girl.” As the command shuttle set down on the surface of the moon, he quickly powered it off and left the crew cabin before the droid could ask him more questions he didn't want to answer. 

“What are you doing?!” he shouted over his shoulder before sliding on his helmet.

Kylo stepped off the command shuttle onto the fine gray silt of Concordia and was met by several commanding stormtroopers in their red, white, and black pauldrons. Even after ascending to Supreme Leader, he retained the same division his former master had assigned him. These men were his men – and women – more than they were the general’s. Technically, they were Captain Phasma’s men, but that wasn't the point. They loyally fought by his side; he trusted them because they had proven themselves in battle – the troopers that had survived Tuanul, Takodana, and Starkiller, that is. FN-1138, JY-834, FN-1044, FN-3156, FN-2198, HX-1072, FN-2000, FN-3181, TK-338 and FN-1824 had been with him since Jakku and had all been promoted to commanding ranks. He trusted they would keep their new recruits in line.

He had lost most of his division on Starkiller. Then there was FN-417, whom Rey had killed in the forest on Takodana. FN-2003, whom the traitor referred to as Slip, was killed on Tuanul. Kylo
enjoyed imagining Poe Dameron as his murderer, because wouldn't that be the sick sense of humor of the Force for the traitor to rescue the very man that had killed his best friend? FN-2003 was the weakest of the group. Kylo knew he wouldn't survive combat, but he couldn't help wondering if he was the catalyst to FN-2187's betrayal.

FN-2199, known as “nines,” had also been the traitor's brother-in-arms, but reports suggested either he or Han Solo had been the one to kill him. Kylo had lost more, it was the consequence of war – but these men were taken by Rey and her closest “friends.” Yet Rey acted as if he was the only murderer taking lives in war. What made the trooper they killed different? Why didn’t their lives matter?

His attention returned to battle at the sound of blaster fire and explosions. There must have been a secondary uprising. During his months spent invading planets in the Unknown Regions, Kylo had come to understand that if the prisoners who had originally surrendered were released, there was often a secondary uprising. It was much easier to kill everyone that had engaged them.

“Sir,” the captain stepped forward. “The prisoners are secured in a building at the north end of the village, but the villagers are blocking our troops’ return to the shuttles. The prisoners claim they could assist with the villagers’ surrender but are refusing to cooperate until they have personally spoken with you. They are expecting full compensation on the bounties for providing the location of the Resistance.”

“Have they provided anyone the location?”

“Negative, sir,” she said. Good. He didn't want to face killing his own men to make certain Rey’s location died on that frigid moon. From what he had researched about Concordia mid-jump, it was supposed to be a forest moon, but the landscape was barren save for the small settlement on the outskirts of a frozen lake. It was shrouded in darkness, which he found peculiar for a firefight. The quickest strategy to subdue an uprising was to use the flametroopers, forcing the villagers from their dwellings. The commanders should have anticipated that.

The stormtroopers led the procession as they made their way past primitive speeders and mining equipment. Mandalore illuminated the moon's dark sky. As they neared the village, the percussion of the explosions shuddered through the Force, stirring his pre-battle anticipation that drew in the darkness. Within seconds, his lightsaber was in his hands, ignited and sparking. He followed the others into the village and learned quickly that Hux’s intel was terribly wrong. The uprising was not under control; it had clearly never been under control. Every villager that was capable, was armed. They used the elevated terrain of rooftops and large mining vehicles to their advantage. They had the upper hand over Hux's trained assassins.

The new recruits had apparently never faced real-life adversaries before – they had broken
formation, scattered throughout the village, leaderless and frenzied. The villagers were hidden from view, save for the instances they popped up to fire at his troopers, all chanting the same string of words in their native Mando'a tongue, “pirunir sur'haaise!” Based upon the aggressive reaction to his troops, he was guessing it was closer to “kill them all” than “let's surrender.” It might as well have been a friendly greeting, considering the lack of response by his men. The commanders at least had the sense to lay down suppressive fire until they reached the building.

For his part, Kylo redirected the bolts with his weapon or the Force if they were fired from further away. It only served to spike his anger, which was consumed by more darkness. He wanted the uprising quelled by the time he finished with the prisoners. As he stepped into the building, he turned to the nearest trooper. The vocoder of his helmet hissed with his command. “Burn the village.”

Kylo eyed the structure as he followed the others deeper down a corridor. Fine sand fell from the cracks in the ceiling as the explosions continued to shudder around them. The squad of troopers crammed into the largest room, blasters trained on the five Concordians on their knees. “Who is the leader?” His electronic voice crackled through the silence of the room as he gestured to the prisoners with his lightsaber, illuminating the others in the darkness. No one spoke. The prisoner furthest to the right was shaking, refusing to meet his eyes. That one was clearly not the leader. He stood behind the fearful prisoner, flipping his lightsaber in his grip before running the man through with its blade. The others gasped as he kicked the body forward onto the floor.

“Who…. is…. the leader?”

“Gedet'ye. Nayc or'atu. Bic cuyr ni,” the man in the middle said. Kylo stalked with a deliberate, measured stride to stand in front of the man, who stared up at him defiantly. The man's hair was short, and his eyes were dark. He had the body of a warrior. Clad in armour, he was prepared for battle. Kylo had seen it more often than he could count. They defended their homes, their villages, their worlds honorably, but they always fell to his blade. Information would not be given willingly.

“Kill the others,” he commanded. Kylo held the prisoner’s glare as the sound of blasters exploded into the room, followed by the sickening wet thud of the bodies collapsing to the ground. The man barely flinched.

“Do you speak Basic?”

“For Force sake… you,” he said, gesturing to the nearest stormtrooper, “get me a translating vocoder.”

His eyes never left the man as he watched him intently. “Do you understand Basic? What is your name?”


“It seems my reputation precedes me,” Kylo huffed darkly, accepting the black vocoder a stormtrooper offered tentatively with an outstretched palm. “Though it should be no surprise, I suppose. You have discovered the bounty and the location to the Resistance. Now, you will give it to me.”

“Nu draar. Mhi draar cetar par demagolka.” Kylo knelt and placed the mask over Aber Kai's jaw. The silver accented contraption stretched over the lower half of the man's face, leaving his eyes uncovered to bore into Kylo's mask. “I said 'never.' We will never kneel in submission to you.”

“You're already kneeling,” Kylo said as the power of darkness surged in his veins. “It would be wise not to forget that.”

“And we found their location on our scanners, it would be wise not to forget that,” Aber Kai spat. “You will provide us with hyperspace capable ships, and we will capture the Resistance. Only when we receive our bounty, will you receive your captives.”

Kylo slowly stepped closer to the prisoner, his boots echoing on the stone floor. “You are mistaken in believing this is a negotiation.” The man jolted forward at Kylo, but the stormtrooper behind him grabbed his shoulder and used his momentum to slam him face-first into the ground. The man coughed through the vocoder as he sat back on his knees.

“I am not afraid,” Aber Kai said, staring unwaveringly into Kylo’s mask. There was nothing different or special about this man; Kylo had seen defiant prisoners before. Their blood spilled the same. With a twist of his wrist, Kylo's crackling blade traced the line of the man's jaw, pricking his skin from mere centimeters away. “You will not kill me as long as I know the location and you do not.”

Kylo smirked behind his mask. “You're right –”
“Then give us the ships.”

“–But you assume I cannot take it from you.” Aber Kai stared into the visor of his mask, daring him to try. “You will receive your payment and your glory, but the Resistance is mine.”

Aber Kai pushed off the vocoder and spat blood on Kylo's boots. “Kote lo'shebs'ul narit!” The blood from a wound to his lip stained the man’s teeth as he bared them like a feral creature. Kylo knelt to the man’s level and stared at him, silently waiting in challenge with his head cocked until the man slid the mask back over his mouth. “I said 'you can keep your glory.' We want the credits. We do not trust outsiders to keep their promise. We deliver the prisoners, or the location dies with us.”

“You do not trust me, but you will sell out my enemies to face my wrath?”

“We were born to desire two things, Kylo Ren,” Aber Kai informed him as blood dripped from underneath his mask onto the floor. “Credits and death to outsiders. Credits for us to live, and death to outsiders for us to live in peace. I do not care what you do to those I collect for your bounty. Nor should you care what I do to them.”

Kylo stood, pointing the weapon at the man's face. “You will not touch the prisoners. Give me the location or give me the one who can.”

“We will not yield to your demands,” he replied, and Poe Dameron's voice echoed in Kylo's head. The Resistance will not be intimidated by you. Kylo had taken what he wanted then, and he would do it again.

“Do you know who I am?” It was not a question. “What I can do?”

“Demagolka.”

Kylo hesitated. The mask was still in place. It was not the answer, nor the language, he was expecting. “Demagolka?”

Aber Kai stared at him with a look in his eyes that Kylo knew all too well. He had seen it in many people's eyes when they looked upon him, for as long as he had memories. He remembered the first time he had seen it in Rey's eyes. “Someone who commits unspeakable atrocities. A real-life
monster, like the Empire's Darth Vader.”

Kylo stood over the man, forcing him to incline his head to look up at him, and murmured. “Ah, the same blood flows in my veins. Do not underestimate my power.” Aber Kai lunged for Kylo, dislodging his mask in the struggle, but this time, the Force held him in place. Kylo tutted in disapproval.

“Gar taldin ni jaonyc; gar sa buir, ori'wadaas'la.” Kylo stepped back, releasing the man, who fell forward onto his hands.

His patience was growing thin. “I trust that babble was the location of the Resistance?”

Aber Kai breathed heavily for a moment before a stormtrooper struck him with his weapon and forced the vocoder back on his face. “It's an old Mando saying. 'No one cares who your father was, only the father you'll be.' Bloodline is not important. Lineage does not make the man,” he paused, lifting his head. “You are no Darth Vader, and I do not fear you.”

“Not yet.” Kylo extended his hand, breathing in the darkness before he manipulated the Force with his fingers, ripping into the man's consciousness. He could make the extraction quick and relatively painless; the mind barely resisted the intrusion, but he wanted it to hurt. Aber Kai screamed, gripping his temples as he fell over onto his side. He writhed on the ground as Kylo tore his memories apart.

The worst element of entering someone's mind was that he felt everything they felt. The pain was tolerable, and necessary; he used it for more strength in the darkness to complete the grueling mission. The emotions were more difficult to ignore – the people they thought about when they believed they were dying, the memories they grasped onto that interfered with his task. The memories Kylo witnessed in this Aber Kai’s mind made one thing clear; the Concordians wanted to watch the galaxy burn. The children were trained from infancy to become warriors, to destroy all others in the galaxy who threatened their way of life. There had been generations that existed solely in seclusion. They were all brainwashed to their radicalized propaganda.

Kylo pushed through the indoctrination to the truth. This man was not their leader; their leader had led the invasion on Mandalore. Aber Kai had told one truth, however, he did know the location of the Resistance. They all did. The men, the women, the children... they all knew where Rey was. They would not stop until they completed the mission and brought the bounty back to Concordia. There would be no surrender, no eliminating the select few in high command who knew the secret.

They had forced his hand.
Kylo withdrew from Aber Kai's mind with a jolt. Collapsed on his side, the man gasped for breath through the obstruction of the mask. “You have what you want,” he said weakly, “Just go.”

He had never given much thought to the mindset of the person he was tasked to kill, it was easier that way, but his second-in-command did. The Knight enjoyed watching the life drain from the eyes of those unlucky to meet their fate at the end of his blade. After the death of his father, Kylo thought about that now. It wasn’t the moment of death in a person’s eyes that interested him, but the moment of acceptance when a person understood they would die. He held the man’s stare as he said his next words. “You know what I saw. You know I can’t do that.”

“You have the location! We're no longer a threat to...” Kylo watched the realization bloom in Aber Kai’s eyes. He watched them widen in horror. Despite the darkness crashing inside him, it wasn’t as satisfying as he had hoped. The man pushed himself up to his knees to face Kylo. “It was all a lie. You only wanted to know what we knew. You never wanted –” Kylo reached forward and ripped the vocoder from his face so the other stormtroopers would not be wise to what Aber Kai now understood. “Gar draar copaanir mar'eyir ashi. Gar copaanir uur mhi. Me'copaani? Me'vaabir? Kyr'amur mhi an? Te dalyc? Te ade? Tion'ad cuyir te Jetii at gar?”

“You're right,” Kylo said, voice low, as apathetic as he could muster. “Do you fear me now?”

“Gedet'ye.” The man knelt before him, his hands pressed together in supplication. No matter the language or culture, the plea for life was always the same. “Gedet'ye.

Kylo raised his lightsaber to the side of his throat. “There will be no mercy. Any last words?”

“Ret'urcye mhi, cyare'se, ganar vercopaanir. Pirunir sur'haaise.” He recognized the last part as the same words as those chanted by the villagers outside. At least the man was loyal to his cause until the end. His death was swift, Kylo ensured it. The saber had sliced through Aber Kai's throat before he could take his next breath.

“We have what we need,” he told the others, then left the building without another word. As he stepped outside, the Force was suddenly alight with warning. Turning, he quickly halted the projectile, a charge, before it reached them. He shoved it back the way it had come. The uprising outside had not been managed. It was a free-for-all. The village was ablaze, smoke was blocking the view of the sky, but the villagers still maintained the upper hand. The troopers were cornered into alleyways, huts burning around them. The villagers were still chanting “pirunir sur'haaise” and “ash'amur aruetii.” Men, women, and children were running through the village, taking up weapons to fight.
He pressed forward into the battle, easily felling his adversaries with a quick slash of his blade or a strategically placed blaster bolt ricochet. Several of the villagers caught on and attempted to swarm him at once. It was carnage; he could feel their blood soaking through his clothes, branding his skin with their deaths, but it was easier to aim for unprotected arteries rather than masses in the chaos of limbs in a mob assault.

This... this was where he had spent years of his life… on the battlefield. The orange glow from the fire, dedlandite mixed with the sharp smell of iron, the sticky warmth of the blood of his enemies, it was all familiar and oddly soothing. After each battle, he had collected the bodies and burned them. He had kept their ashes as a reminder of the cost that had been paid for him to exact revenge. This was all muscle memory, but he took no pleasure in it as he once had. He was sick of war. The idea of falling to his enemy wasn’t a necessarily unwelcome one, but he would fight to survive, because he promised her.

Kylo's attention was drawn to his right, where a woman had been thrown from a rooftop into their ranks. What had first seemed like an attempt to save her life from the fire by a group of villagers transformed quickly as Kylo realized she had something strapped around her midsection. An infant? No, the tremor in the Force indicated something far more alarming. He was barely able to contain the blast as the thermal detonators exploded. The woman was dead, as were two of his men, but the damage could have been significantly worse. Just as the debris settled, another tremor in the Force afforded him just enough warning to raise his hands to block the majority of the explosion before it sent them all sprawling onto their backs.

The fine dust cloud created by the blast obscured his vision as he pushed himself to his feet. His ears were ringing, and it became necessary to draw on the Force to remain standing until sound returned. It wasn't until the ashes in the air burned his lungs that he realized how pervasively he had damaged the filter in his helmet. The smoke poured through the filter, but there was no point in removing it; he needed it for protection if the villagers continued using themselves as living bombs.

“Pull the division back!” he shouted into the dust cloud. Somewhere to his right, he heard a commanding trooper echo his orders. As his faculties returned, he realized his lightsaber was no longer in his hands. He scanned the ground around him before reaching into the Force and calling it to his hand. Igniting it swiftly, he used the crimson glow to find an alleyway. It was thick with smoke, but it was better than attempting to traverse blindly in the open. Several stormtroopers followed his lead. Their masks were better equipped to filter the heavy smoke of the alley. If he hadn't already been struggling to fit his broad frame through the narrow passageway, he would have stepped aside for them to lead.

He should have.
As they neared the exit, he almost tripped on someone crouched down by his boots. He would have, had he not heard a cough as he was nearly upon him. The troopers slammed into Kylo as he stopped short, but he couldn’t find it in himself to be annoyed. Illuminating the small form with his blade, he saw that it was a Concordian child, no more than four or five standard years of age. His eyes were wide with fear, but they looked evil as they reflected the red of his lightsaber, and Kylo instinctively disengaged his weapon.

“Gaa'tayl,” the child whimpered. He couldn't very well leave the child in the middle of the alley, so he offered him his open palm. The boy was turned away from him, clearly frightened. Kylo was positive his mask was not helping with his intimidating presence. The alleyway was heavy with smoke, however, and they were still in danger. The Force was alight in warning with the surrounding explosions, so he couldn't remove it. After a brief hesitation, the child placed a hand in his, and Kylo pulled him to a stand. “Ash'amur.” In one second, the boy was smiling and turning toward him. In the next, green light filled his vision.

The alarm bells of Kylo's intuition did not start ringing until he jerked from the echo of blaster fire down the passageway. When his eyes adjusted from the first green flash, he looked for the small boy who had been holding his hand a mere second ago. He expected that he would find the child crumpled in death at his feet. Finding the boy standing before him was not what made his blood run cold.

It was what was in that young boy's hands – a blaster. Kylo found it odd that the pain did not set in until he saw the weapon. By the time his brain caught up to what had happened, there was another flash of green light between them. His knee gave out when the second bolt hit. The left side of his abdomen was on fire. The child gasped as the crimson light of the blade once again illuminated his face, as well as the distance between them. This time he had something to fear. The child crumpled at Kylo’s feet. With a sudden devastating clarity, Kylo realized what he had done and dropped the weapon. There were distant shouts and white blurs consuming his vision as the world spun around him. The alley returned to darkness as the Supreme Leader fell.
Chapter End Notes

Major violence

It is a battle, Kylo kills people. This includes a child, but it is technically self-defense. He also executes several prisoners. There is other graphic violence of war, including Kylo suffering an injury.
New Understanding

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“You wanted to see me?” Rey asked as she entered the room. The Force was stronger there than anywhere else in the temple. It felt as if Leia was blanketed in it. Rey feared what Leia could sense in her through its energy. As if she had not been conflicted enough, how could she look her bondmate’s mother in the eyes and lie about secrets significant to the Resistance? Rey wondered what Leia would do if she found out about their bond. Or the vial? Would she force her to leave the Resistance? How could Rey call herself a member of the Resistance when she carried those secrets?

“Yes, Rey, I wanted to inform you about the disturbing news myself,” the older woman said gently. Rey swallowed in dread. Since their last connection, Rey had an uneasy feeling growing in the pit of her stomach. When she was summoned by the protocol droid, Rey assumed the conversation likely revolved around Kylo in some capacity. She hadn’t considered that, as leader of the Resistance and Kylo’s mother, Leia would likely find out first if something terrible had happened to him.

Rey wrung her fingers anxiously. “Yes, General?”

“Please, call me Leia.” If not for her failing voice and her fading presence in the Force, Rey would not have realized how dire Leia’s health situation had become. The woman exuded strength, poise, and hard-earned wisdom, but her body was failing her. Could she die? Would her last days be spent grieving her son as well?

“Yes, Leia?” she asked as steadily as the panic inside her would allow.

“Rey, we received news that the First Order has issued a bounty for the Millennium Falcon,” the general said carefully. “For the time being, we are stuck on this planet until we receive help from our allies.”

Rey’s first reaction was to release the breath she was holding in relief. Kylo was okay. He was issuing bounties, but he was okay. Then the implications began to set in. With the secrets she had been keeping from the Resistance, the decision to leave to protect them only strengthened. That choice, however, had been taken away from her in an instant, and she shuddered to think of the choice she would be forced to make. “No one can leave?”

“I’m sorry, but not right now.” Leia sighed, and a flash of pain crossed her eyes. It was strong
enough that Rey could feel it in the Force around her. Instead of crumbling from her pain, the woman seemed to gain more strength from it. “And there’s more. A bounty has been issued by... the Supreme Leader for you as well.”

Rey shook her head, refusing to believe that the man that held her hand so she could see the rain and saved her from falling to her death had issued a bounty on her. “Ben? Ben issued a bounty on me?”

Leia seemed taken aback by the use of her son’s given name, but Rey was too distracted to focus on the implications. How could he do this, after what happened between us on Kamino? I thought he was changing. I thought he was just scared. After everything, how could he care so little to want me dead?

“The man that did this is not Ben anymore,” Leia said. She wasn’t angry, but rueful. “As he demonstrated on Crait, he will kill us all if he gets the chance. We must not forget that.”

“He wants me dead? Why?” Her voice was quiet, the words spoken more to herself than the woman studying her carefully.

*You know the answer,* the voice whispered. *He never cared. You are nothing to him... Just a means to an end.*

“That is a good question.” Her perceptive eyes studied Rey, and she wondered what exactly the woman knew. “What we do know is he issued a five million credit bounty for you. That is as much as the rest of us combined.” Rey felt small under Leia’s searching stare. What could she say? She couldn’t tell her the truth, though she wondered what her advice would have been. Would she expect Rey to give up on her son?

“It must be for what I did to him on Starkiller,” she lied. She felt pinned under those dark, venerable eyes. Rey knew them well, but in someone else. The eyes pierced right through her to the truth. Perhaps Rey shouldn’t have been surprised that the moment the words left her tongue, the older woman wouldn’t believe them. Guilt tightened in Rey’s chest at the thought of deceiving the woman in front of her - a woman who had done nothing but show her kindness and acceptance.

“Perhaps,” Leia said politely, but her eyes didn’t abandon their search. “Could there be any other reason for him to react this way?”
Rey knew she didn’t believe her. She knew she suspected that something had happened between her and her son. Rey didn’t have it in her heart to continue lying to the only mother figure she ever had, but something in her refused to betray her bondmate. “Well, I am his equal in the light,” she equivocated, hoping that it would be an acceptable answer.

“That is true.” Leia’s voice was soft but disappointed. Her eyes lowered to her hands, and Rey knew that, unlike her son, she would allow Rey to maintain her deceit. “I wish I had a better answer for you. Ben wasn’t born a monster. I knew he had darkness, but I never thought he was this lost. Now he is the face of the First Order – and actively trying to kill everyone else I love. I’m so sorry, Rey.”

“Leia, can I ask you a question?” Leia’s glassy eyes met hers as she nodded. “How did he fall to darkness?” She hoped there was an easy solution that Kylo had ignored. She was terrified that one day she wouldn’t have control over the darkness anymore.

Leia may have been sitting in the room with her, but her eyes – and her mind – traveled far away. “That is a question that has haunted me since he left. There are no simple answers.”

“I know Luke’s betrayal was the catalyst for him to join Snoke, but that still requires darkness, doesn’t it? Did he always have darkness in him, or did he nurture it somehow? How did it become this?” Rey’s words brought Leia’s eyes back to hers, and the woman was suddenly very interested in the present.

“What betrayal?” Leia asked slowly, her intense stare penetrating straight through to Rey’s soul again, searching for answers. Her eyes were so similar to her son’s, but there was still something missing, a wild magnetism that was uniquely Kylo. Though they were different, the ferocity was the same. At the mention of betrayal, Rey could see the fire burning within her stare. It must have been a Skywalker gene.

“Luke never told you?”

“Told me what, exactly?” Leia was the embodiment of emotional control, but Rey sensed a protective agitation. Her voice was low, her words were clipped. Rey knew the anger was not directed at her. She thought Leia knew. She thought Luke would have told Ben’s own mother what happened. The implications were devastating.

*Ben has been gone for years, and all that time, no one knew why he turned?*
Leia, he pulled his lightsaber on Ben when he was sleeping.” When Leia’s eyes widened in shock, Rey wished it had been anyone else who had been there to tell her. Rey barely knew how to function normally around the others, let alone deliver consequential news. Her own heart was breaking, and it wasn’t her family that had been torn apart. “It’s not what you think; it was a fleeting moment of fear, because he looked into Ben’s mind and saw darkness. But Ben woke up, thought Luke was trying to kill him, and panicked. That was why he destroyed the temple.”

“And Luke told you this?” Leia asked, denial and suspicion warring for influence over her eyes. Rey feared she wouldn’t believe her. Luke was her brother; what reason did she have to believe Rey? The only reason she continued was for Kylo.

“No, Ben told me.” Realizing the implication, she continued. “Before, when we were face to face. Obviously. It’s not like he can tell me things when we are across the galaxy from each other. That would be crazy.” Her eyes avoided Leia. “But Luke confirmed it when I confronted him on Ahch-To.”

“I wish Ben had told me. I wish he had run back to us instead of Snoke,” Leia lamented, a single tear trailing down her cheek. “I would have protected him, even from my own brother. But he blamed us, too, for not telling him about his grandfather.”

“Darth Vader,” Rey realized.

“That is what he called himself.” There was a darkness to her voice that Rey had not heard before. An almost... hatred.

“I don’t understand,” Rey whispered. “Why would Ben want to be like Darth Vader?”

“Do you have anywhere to be?” Rey shook her head. Leia patted the space next to her on the makeshift bed, inviting Rey to join her. Rey was more than happy to avoid the galaxy outside that room for a few minutes. “I guess, to answer that question, we have to start at the beginning. This was all told to me by my mother Breha and Luke, who learned it from a ghost in the Force, as it were. His name was Obi-wan Kenobi – ‘Ben’ for short, my son’s namesake.

“I suppose it all began with a little boy named Anakin Skywalker, the product of a mortal mother and the Force itself, if legends are to be believed. He was a slave on a desert planet, much like you were, Rey. Two Jedi - a Master, and Padawan - happened upon him, noticed his strength in the Force, and freed him from slavery. They believed him to be the Chosen One prophesied to bring balance to the Force, so they took him from his mother to train him. The Master Jedi died before he could train the very powerful boy, leaving his padawan Obi-Wan to train him alone.
“Anakin fell in love with the Queen of Naboo, Padmé Amidala Naberrie, though attachments of any kind were forbidden for a Jedi. He married her in secret, caught between his duty as a Jedi and his forbidden love for Padmé. Eventually, Padmé became pregnant with Luke and me - it was an inevitability that their relationship would become public.” Rey sympathized with Anakin. She knew the conflict he faced all too well, being caught between two worlds. Only he had everything he could have ever wanted, and he gave all that up, just as Kylo had. Why?

“I don’t understand,” Rey whispered. “Why would he turn?”

Leia smiled in sorrow. “Anakin had a premonition of his mother’s death in a dream. He tried to rescue her after she had been taken prisoner, but he was too late. He allowed darkness into his heart when he slaughtered an entire village in revenge for her death. She may have died a prisoner, but sometimes I envy her fate.”

Rey was aghast that the strong woman in front of her would say something so terrible. “How?”

“Everyone dies, Rey, but she died in the loving arms of her son. She had made the choice to send her son away so he could be a Jedi. And she was able to see the incredible Jedi and man he had become before she died. I believe she died content, never witnessing his heartbreaking fall to darkness. She never endured the loss of the people she loved at her own boy’s hands. If I could have only been so lucky,” Leia murmured wistfully. Her eyes clouded for a moment in pensive reflection before she continued with her story. The first tear escaped down Rey’s cheek.

“Then Anakin had a difference of opinion when it came to the Jedi Council, and he began to question his loyalty to them. He was also influenced by Chancellor Palpatine, who would become Darth Sidious, the Emperor. He began to turn Anakin’s heart even further against the council and his master, Obi-Wan. Palpatine convinced him that they were the true evil in the galaxy. According to Obi-Wan, his heart was in the right place, but fear and a culmination of choices by everyone involved led to his fall.”

“But how could he turn his back on Padmé?” Rey knew how heartbroken Kylo had left her in the throne room, a man she had barely known a week, when he had already chosen darkness long before he had ever met her. She wondered the despair Padmé suffered to lose the man she loved to the dark side. It would have destroyed her to fall in love with Ben Solo and watch him become Kylo Ren, to watch him abandon her like her parents had.

“He had another dream premonition that Padmé would die during childbirth,” Leia explained. “Palpatine told Anakin that the darkness could prevent her death if Anakin surrendered himself to the dark side and Palpatine’s guidance.”
“Is it true? Does the dark side have that ability?”

“There have been legends of a Sith machine that could save those who were mortally wounded from dying…or even bring someone back from the dead. But I have never heard of anyone who has actually seen such a machine,” Leia explained in a tone that wasn’t entirely disbelieving. “Even if Palpatine had such a machine, he never had the chance to use it. The Jedi Council discovered Palpatine’s plans for the Empire and confronted him. Anakin was forced to choose between the two sides. Unfortunately, Mace Windu, one of the Masters, had a moment of weakness and decided to kill Palpatine rather than just detain him. Windu feared that the Republic would fall if the Chancellor survived. What is one life compared to the threat of losing millions? I suppose it was a moment of weakness similar to the one my brother faced with my son. And it had similar consequences. It was enough for Anakin to question if Palpatine was right about the Jedi Council. He fought Windu for Palpatine’s life and accidentally killed the Jedi Master in the process. After killing a Jedi, he believed that his only choice was the dark side.”

Rey shook her head. She didn’t care about the Jedi council; he had a family. “But what about Padmé?”

“Under the Emperor’s orders, Anakin began killing all the Jedi. He even killed the younglings. Padmé confronted him. She begged him to come back to the light as he begged her to join him.” Rey understood that confrontation all too well. She empathized with Padmé’s desperation, because she knew what it felt to compete and lose against the power of the darkness. Kylo was right; he was just like his grandfather. Her thoughts were drawn back to Leia when she continued, “but they were interrupted by Obi-Wan, who was the closest person Anakin had to a brother. In his darkness, he believed Obi-Wan had turned her against him. Anakin reacted violently… he choked Padmé with the Force; he nearly killed her, accidentally prompting her labor. Obi-Wan and Anakin fought. It ended when Obi-Wan mortally wounded Anakin on a planet called Mustafar. Anakin survived due to the power of Darth Sidious and a special suit that kept him alive. That was how he ultimately became Darth Vader. If Darth Sidious did have that machine, he didn’t use it on Anakin; he left him in a constant state of suffering. Padmé died during childbirth as Anakin had foreseen, and Darth Sidious led him to believe that he had killed her instantly in his violent reaction. Anakin believed we didn’t survive. Luke was sent to Tatooine with our uncle, protected by Obi-Wan, who became Ben Kenobi in hiding. I was adopted by Senator Organa and his wife from Alderaan.”

“Becoming royalty like your mother – a princess,” Rey supplied.

“Yes.” Leia sighed before continuing. “The Empire grew, Vader terrorized the galaxy under the command of the Emperor, and fate in the shape of a droid brought us all together. The droid had a map of the Death Star, and Vader wanted it before it found its way into the hands of the Rebellion. I hid it with Artoo and sent him to Ben Kenobi on Tatooine in a plea for help before Vader captured me. Luke was no one to the war, he just happened upon the droid and helped bring Artoo to Ben. Fate dragged him into the war. He found passage aboard the Millennium Falcon with Han.
He was a smuggler and was only involved for the money they promised. They intended to bring
the plans to Alderaan to my father. But the Empire had already destroyed Alderaan in front of me,
and the *Falcon* was captured by the Death Star. They found me where I was being held prisoner
and rescued me. To help us escape, Ben Kenobi confronted his former padawan and brother. Vader
killed him as Luke watched. I think that moment was when Luke joined the war. He was the one
who eventually destroyed the Death Star at the Battle of Yavin.”

A droid with a map? A fallen Jedi controlled by an evil Emperor? A Force-sensitive desert child
who found a droid and was drawn into a war? An escape on the *Millennium Falcon*? A destroyed
planet? A giant superweapon? A sacrifice of the master to save the others from the apprentice...
“This sounds awfully familiar,” Rey quipped. She didn’t know the ending of the story, but it
wasn’t difficult to guess. Luke would have had to face his father. They defeated the Empire, Darth
Vader was dead, Rey knew it was likely that Luke delivered that fate.

“Well, at least you are not bonded by blood to a monster,” Leia smirked wanly. Rey didn’t smile
back. She may not have had a bond of blood to a monster, but she did have one in the Force.

She couldn’t imagine the strength it must have taken to do it.

Leia shook her head. “Luke didn’t kill Darth Vader.”

“But I thought…”

“Luke refused to join him, but he also refused to kill our father. He believed in the light he felt
inside him,” Leia said, restoring hope in Rey’s aching heart. “The Emperor tried to kill Luke, and
Vader killed the Emperor instead, mortally wounding himself in the process. He died for Luke.”
Rey wondered if Kylo had been mortally wounded in the throne room, would she have believed
that he had turned, too?

“Do you think he died in the light?”

“In his dying moments, yes. But does death truly redeem him, if he didn’t have to live with the
consequences of his actions?” Leia asked, giving voice to Rey’s fears. “If he had lived, could he
have turned his back on the Empire? Given up all that power? It depends upon whom you ask. I do
not hold the same hope for the redemption of my father as Luke did.” As quickly as her hope
appeared, it faded again. Rey didn’t believe Anakin had turned, not after what she had witnessed in
the throne room. If his grandfather couldn’t be saved, what hope was there for Kylo?
“But to answer your question,” Leia said with exhaustion bleeding into her words. “Anakin’s story is a complicated one, and one I didn’t care to know until I lost my son. Luke forgave our father; I didn’t try until after Ben left. Perhaps if I had come to terms with the legacy of my father sooner, I would still have my son. I think only Ben could tell you what part of that man’s life he identified with. He never heard the story from us, so I can only imagine what idealized story Snoke told him.”

“Do you think...” Rey began, but a sharp pain in her side caused her to cry out into the room. She could almost hear the blaster fire, could almost feel the crippling impact, could almost smell the blood and cauterized flesh. She could have explained it all away until she felt his fear. The Force around her was screaming in warning. The dread and unease that she had felt entering that room returned in full force, sinking in her stomach to an all-consuming terror. As she clutched at the phantom wound, she understood the implications.

Ben.

She didn’t know how, but she had to find him. In her panic, her eyes met Leia’s. She was leaning forward on her hands, her own chest was heaving in panic. An awareness flashed across the mother’s eyes as Rey jumped to her feet. “I have to go!” she shouted over her shoulder as she sprinted down the corridor.
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Some retelling of death in a story
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Kylo collapsed into the empty passenger compartment of his Upsilon-class command shuttle, too.
weak to continue to pull strength from the Force. The only other crew on board were controlling
the shuttle from the crew cabin. They would not be bothering him after he had adamantly denied
their support, despite their insistence of displaying concern for his well-being. The thought of
trusting anyone around him in his weakness was terrifying. Though he could have programmed the
shuttle to return to the Finalizer, the officers and troopers who had carried him on board were
useful at the controls. It was satisfying to hear the release of the proton torpedos that leveled the
entire village on his orders, erasing the Concordians – and their threat to Rey – from existence.

Blue refused to leave his side, the panicked beeps oddly comforting as he finally felt safe enough to
remove his mask, the servomotors hissing as they released the hinged mechanism. The metallic
thud it created as it slipped from his hand was muted by his labored breaths as he breathed fresh
air.

He slumped heavily to the cool floor, resting his back against a seat as he took advantage of a
moment of silence. The battle had not gone as anticipated – battles rarely did– but he had hesitated,
and it was costly. The wounds to his left side ached sharply as his blood leaked onto the floor. He
studied the steady crimson stream for a moment, fascinated by which path it would take across the
floor, but his sight was fading in and out of focus. A hiss escaped his lips as he adjusted to rest
more of his weight on the seat behind him.

The blaster wound was more painful than he remembered, but if he clamped his jaw down tight
even, it was tolerable. The droid was panicked, pacing back and forth. With his internal gyros,
he would swing his head around pointedly on every turn. It was overly dramatic; clearly the droid
was naïve to the realities and consequences of war. Kylo gave everything he had in battle and had
sustained his fair share of injuries because of it. If Blue stayed by his side – such a foreign concept
that he refused to consider its implications – then the droid would likely witness more.

He closed his eyes and retrieved the cache of memories that he had accessed more times than he
could count, an instantaneous connection to the anger he sought, streamlining him to the comfort
of darkness. The cold that accompanied the dark was overwhelming, or had he been cold before?
He couldn't remember.

The dark soothed the wound, weakening the tremors that rolled through his body, and he felt his
consciousness drifting. Kylo had been wounded in battle before, and he knew the danger of
succumbing to exhaustion, but the dark was calling him, assuring him that he could sleep. He was
convinced the wound was not fatal – primarily because he had been blasted there before with a
much deadlier weapon – and he planned to seek Bacta treatment from the medbay when the shuttle
returned to the Finalizer. A moment of rest sounded peaceful; he couldn't remember the last time
he had slept. The warnings of intuition and past experiences weakened as his body grew too heavy
to support on his own. His connection to the physical world slipped, and he was more than happy
to let go. His ears still rang from the explosions; he barely registered her presence until she was
upon him.
“Ben!” Rey cried. Her nearing footfalls snagged the last thread of his fading consciousness. He winced in pain as she tumbled to his side. He wasn't certain how long she shook him before he realized what was happening. There was panic in her tearing eyes as he raised his head slowly, his eyelids heavy with fatigue. His own fear escalated as he sensed hers.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded hoarsely, though she paid little attention to his words, or did he forget to say them aloud? He was going to repeat himself, but he was distracted by movement. She pulled at his shoulder roughly, dragging him onto his back. The last he remembered, he had been in a seated position. When had he fallen over? He tried to ask her, but she seemed to be moving and speaking impossibly fast. She leaned over him, grasping his tunic in her hands, and the warmth was comforting. He watched the motion of her lips as she articulated words, but it was as if she was speaking an alien language – probably Mando’a. He should have learned Mando’a. Where was the vocoder?

“Ben!” He opened his eyes. When had he closed them? It wasn't the fear overwhelming the bond that snapped him back to awareness, or the tears in her eyes as she searched him for injuries. It was when he noticed the pain was fading. If there was one truth Kylo never forgot in battle, it was this – pain was good. Pain meant life. Perhaps the blaster had done more damage than he had first thought. Blue was asking a rapid-fire succession of questions that seemed to incite her panic further. The color drained from her face, and Blue released a terrifying screech as she lifted Kylo’s tunic and found the source of the blood.

“No...” she whispered. Tears cut lines down her face as her hands came away with a dark crimson stain. “Ben, there’s so much blood. I don’t know what to do. Tell me what to do! I can’t...”

“I’m fine.” His attempt at a steady response became more of a groan than he had intended. “Here,” he said when he remembered what he had to give her. He reached for the pocket in his cloak. Evidently, he was failing miserably, because her desperate, shaking fingers were fumbling through the folds in the cloak in search of what he needed. She reached her hand in the pocket and pulled out the remnants of the unrecognizable fruit. He groaned petulantly, “I destroyed it, just like everything else I –”

“Damn it, Ben!” She tossed the purple remains on the floor and wiped the juice on her thigh as if it offended her. “I have to stop the bleeding!” Before he could brush off her concern, Rey grabbed his arm, her hand trembling as her eyes scanned the room. His surroundings began to transform to a corridor in the temple but snapped back to his shuttle just as swiftly when she released his arm with a curse.

“How does this work? How do I see where you are...”

I'm fine. I've survived worse.
It was cold then, too, when he collapsed back into the snow to await his fate. Starkiller was a giant ball of plasma now – a star – not destroyed as the rebels had intended, but it would never again be what it once was. Then again, neither would he. Kylo had lain in that very compartment as they escaped its explosion. Hux had stood over him as the med droids worked diligently, cursing Snoke for demanding he save his life. Kylo had been certain to remind the general that the Resistance had destroyed his superweapon before he let himself drift away to more worthwhile thoughts. Kylo had never expected to survive. Hux certainly did the bare minimum to keep him alive, and he would have content to fall by her hand. Rey had been less concerned with his well-being back then, but she had been on his mind all the same. She was fierce and strong and a force to be reckoned with…

The ship shuddered from the explosion of the weaponized planet. No, that already happened, that was the past. That meant... he was shaking. “Ben, open your eyes!” She continued to shake his shoulder long after his eyelids fluttered open. The expression on her face was grim. “You're not fine, okay? There's blood everywhere, your lips are blue, you can't even stay awake. How do I see where you are? I need a medpac.”

“Black box. Next to the weapons cache,” he heard himself say, though his voice sounded strange to his own ears, winded and gravelly. *I am fine,* he wanted to argue, but he couldn't find the energy to express it. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist, and she gasped as his surroundings became clear to her. He was grateful for his long limbs for once as she dragged his hand with her in search of the medpac.

His arm was extended above his head in an uncomfortable position, but at least she had found the box based on the metallic clanking sounds. He hadn't realized how tightly he was grasping her until she pried her arm away. There was no reason to touch him anymore, of course, now that she had what she wanted, but the warmth of her skin had granted him a brief respite from the cold. She and Blue were talking to each other; he could hear the panic in their voices, but he couldn't understand their words. Their voices sounded tinny and far away.

The lights were extremely bright, and he had to force himself to keep his eyes open. She knelt next to his injured side, fiddling with the objects in the pack, before crying out in frustration. “When was the last time you used this thing? The medisensor isn't working, Ben!”

“Starkiller. Some of the blood from my face might have gotten into the internal mechanism,” he attempted to smile, to add levity to the situation, to assure her that everything would be okay. He grit his teeth instead, bracing against a wave of tremors. Rey was in no mood for his humor, her expression panicked even before noticing the shuddering.

“You have to tell me what to do! I don't know what to do!” The fear in her voice and the pleading desperation in her eyes was more concerning to him than his wound. She placed her hand over his
heart, which was still pounding strong enough against his rib cage for her to feel through his tunic. Her hand rested there for longer than necessary as if she was trying to soothe him, or herself. He realized how sweaty he was when her other hand touched the damp skin on his arm. He couldn't feel much at all, which should have terrified him, but he found the loss of sensation comforting. Everything inside him was warning him to listen, to heed the warnings of his intuition, to show her how to help him. But his eyes were heavy, and he could feel the pull of exhaustion. What did she want again? Whatever it was, it could wait. She would understand if he rested his eyes, only for a moment. He hadn't slept in so long…

A sharp pain spread across his cheek. “Ben!” He opened his eyes to Rey's sobs. “I'm sorry I slapped you... nothing else worked. You weren't waking up!” How long had he been unconscious? Kylo felt grounded to the physical world by the slight sting to his cheek. If Rey was that terrified, he should have realized sooner that the situation was dire. He could feel the warnings vibrating in the Force, could feel his own energy fading. This was it? This was what would end Kylo Ren? A blaster bolt from a child on an insignificant moon in a battle that didn't matter? He tried to laugh, but the delivery was more quivering gasp than anything else.

Kylo knew he should have been terrified, but he wasn't. He was tired and the thought of sleep was... comforting. His fear, his anger, his reasons to hate all seemed insignificant now. He wasn't even regretful his life was over. It was almost a relief to end the constant conflict. This was always how it was going to end, wasn't it? What did it matter? He wanted this. What was there to keep fighting for?

“Let me go, Rey,” he whispered.

He let his eyes close, allowed his mind to drift away. There was a light in the darkness, a warmth he hadn't felt in years. He felt drawn to it. There were voices, so many voices around him. Voices he recognized from dreams he couldn't remember. There was something... someone in the glowing light.

“Ben!” Han shouted across the distance between them on the skyway. His back was illuminated in the light, blocking his passage. Kylo knew how this ended; it haunted him in his sleep. He backed away. He wouldn't allow it to happen again. Han moved forward, however, determined to help him. “Not yet, son,” he said. Han's hand reached for Kylo, but he didn't have to touch his cheek for Kylo to remember what it felt like. The weight of it was forever branded into his skin like the scar. It was different this time. Instead of tenderly touching Kylo's cheek, he pounded his fists into his son's chest. Kylo stood there and allowed the older man to hit him; he deserved it after all he had done, but Han was not finished. He grasped his son by the tunic. Before Kylo could twist himself from his grasp, Han shoved him backward off the skyway. “Go back!” Han shouted.

“Come back!” No, that wasn't Han's voice.
“Ben!”

He gasped at the force of the electric shock to his chest. Blinking rapidly in the light of the passenger compartment, Blue was by his side, his tool arm extended, prepared to shock him again. There was another face, next to him, a halo of light behind her head. “Rey?” His voice was foreign to his own ears.

“You came back,” she sobbed, hands clenched in his tunic. He didn’t understand what had changed from a few days before when she had almost killed him with a blaster herself.

_I always come back_, he said across the bond, too weak to speak the words aloud. _But you should have let me go._

“No!” The sound that tore from her throat pained him more than a wound ever could. “Never. You understand me? I will never give up on you. And you can’t... you can’t leave me. You _promised_.” He found the misery in her eyes that he had seen that night when he reached across the universe to touch her hand. _You're not alone_. He knew at that moment he would fight the inevitable for her, even if he had no other reason to stay. “But you're dying right here in front of me, and I can't even drag you to your own mother for help. I'm losing you, and I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do, please,” she begged, her eyes red-rimmed and swollen.

“Okay, okay.” He knew the treatment well; he'd had too much pride to seek the medbay after his former master's training sessions, so he had learned to treat himself. He preferred it when no one else touched him anyway. Certainly, this wound was slightly more dangerous than those wounds, but it was better than nothing.

“Antiseptic, coagulant, bacta gel, laser cauterizer, bacta patch,” he recalled from well-practiced experience. Either he was speaking an alien language or slurring his words, because she shook her head as if she couldn't understand the terms he had rattled off. It required him repeating the words over the bond before she jumped to action with trembling fingers. Blue attempted to assist, though Kylo didn't know how much help the young droid truly provided.

Rey worked with clinical precision, no doubt treating him as another broken thing in need of repair. Though Rey's hands weren't gentle, and though the treatment wasn't painless, he found himself enjoying her attentions, nonetheless. He focused on her hands as she methodically completed each task, trying desperately to fight the heaviness of his eyelids.
She must have noticed his struggle in her frequent monitoring, because she smiled through tears to distract him. It was a fake smile – he could tell because the smile didn't reach her eyes. “Stay with me, Ben.”

“I’m trying,” he groaned as she squeezed something into his wound that instantly burned. She removed a hypo-injector from the medpac, and his hand bolted out to wrap around her wrist. “No, no stim shot.”

Rey scowled. “It’s for the pain…”

“I can handle the pain.”

“Ben, you were shot,” she said, removing the tip of the injector.

“And I refuse to return to the Finalizer drugged!” Kylo didn’t intend to snap at her, but he wouldn’t allow those stimulants in his system. They altered his connection to the Force. He couldn’t show weakness, not for a moment. Kylo was relieved when she replaced the cap to the stim-shot. He exhaled slowly, laying his head down and closing his eyes to rest in the safety he felt in her presence.

“What happened?”

Her question was a transparent attempt to keep him talking. He remembered the chaos. The villagers were primitive; it should have been a simple battle, but what they had lacked in technology, they had made up for in strategy. He shouldn’t have become complacent. War was war. Still, the boy was only a child...

“Close proximity blaster.” He was not going to volunteer any more information than required. Even in his weakened state, he knew how she would react. And what was he to tell her? That the tribe had weaponized children, turned them into war machines? He knew what she would say. And she’d be right, it wasn't any different than the First Order…or the Rebellion. Except the Order or Rebellion did not send the children they brainwashed into battle.

Of course, she wouldn’t be satisfied that easily by his explanation; there was an edge of anger to her tone when she spoke again. “Who did this to you?”
“The Concordians,” he replied through clenched teeth as she cauterized the exposed wound. The burning smell of flesh was something he never quite became accustomed to. “How did you know I was injured?”

“I felt your pain through the bond.”

Could the bond be strong enough to drag them together whenever one needed the other? Or had he thought of her as he was losing consciousness? He couldn't remember. The sharp pain in his side was returning, which he figured was a good sign. Rey had saved his life. But why?

With a poorly concealed grimace, he met her eyes, “You have the vial; you could have won the war.”

“We’ll win the war when you turn.”

“And if I don’t?” he challenged. “The Resistance won't take too kindly to their heroic Jedi saving the life of their enemy.” He didn't know why he said those things, why whenever he felt vulnerable, he chose to instigate conflict instead. Perhaps it was the glaring lack of darkness surrounding her, or perhaps Rey knew him better than anyone, but she didn't take the bait.

“You best be quiet then,” she murmured, lifting his head and sliding her legs under him, replacing the cool floor with the warmth of her lap. “I'm in a corridor by my room; anyone could come along at any moment.”

“Tell them you did it,” he said, wincing as he tried – and failed – to assist her in moving him. “They'll believe that.”

She hummed. Her fingers were gentle as she tentatively wound her fingers through the wavy ends of his hair. It was a simple action, but she had never touched him like that before. “I suppose they would.”

A calming warmth blanketed him as she continued to stroke his hair. Even though it reminded him of childhood memories, he felt safe and content, and it was difficult not to succumb to the pull of sleep. As his eyes fluttered, her fearful voice pulled him back to the present. “Will you be okay?”

He nodded and cleared his throat in vulnerability, then chanced a glance at her face. The fear still
welled in her eyes. “I'll seek treatment as soon as we dock with the Finalizer. I promise.” She let out a relieved sigh. The fear was fading and, in its place, a smile. So simple. So destabilizing.

Kylo stared up at her, studying her face, as she stared down at him. The smile that lifted her cheeks was genuine, and it made her eyes seem impossibly brighter. The freckles on her cheeks were like stars, the gold flecks in her eyes shimmered brightly like rays of the sun. Her nose scrunched under his attention, which only served to make his heart stutter. He felt light-headed and warm, and he doubted it had anything to do with his injury. It wasn’t his fault, he had never seen anyone so…

“Beautiful.” Perhaps it was the fogginess of his blood-starved brain that gave him the foolish idea to speak without censoring his thoughts. He knew she heard his admission by the look of wonderment that crossed her face. Her smile didn't fade, so he counted it as a success. His mind battled between sparking into a frenzy over his reckless sentiment and the calming sensation of her fingers in his hair. The moment was broken by Blue's excited whirs and squeals that his master was on the mend. He didn't want the moment between them to end, but he was exhausted. With her temporary distraction with the droid, the exhaustion won.

“Ben?” he heard her ask quietly, her voice hesitant. That name – he used to hate that name. It was everything he couldn’t be. But the sweet sound that it formed on her lips was hopeful, almost reverent. She spoke his name as if he were worthy of it, and he found it made him want to be. He closed his eyes to the image of her enchanting smile and let the weightless sensation blooming in his chest carry him away.
Physical Trauma

Kylo suffered an injury and is struggling to survive that injury. There is mention of blood and fear of death
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story is 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Ben?”

Kylo's eyes fluttered closed, and she felt his weight grow heavier in her lap. His eyes were by far her favorite feature, but he was still striking in sleep. His breathing was deep and even, slowing as he sank further into unconsciousness. “Ben, stay with me.” The droid next to her echoed her sentiment. She looked up at Blue and smiled to ease his fear. She knew Kylo was more stable now than he had been before the treatment – her best attempt with the limited experience she had – but his condition still concerned her. He promised he would seek further treatment when he returned to the Finalizer, but how long would that be? She noticed his color looked better as she studied his reposed face.

His lips were no longer the alarmingly blue hue. They looked soft, and she desired to touch them. It was a strange warmth she felt, thinking about his lips. It felt like the first time she had seen more than she had expected of him that night on Ahch-To. It was uncomfortable, a powerful shiver, but from the inside. Bodies had always been just vessels in her mind, used to gain nourishment and work to survive. Her entire life had centered around survival. She had seen enough in Niima not to be completely naïve to the primal interactions between people, but it had never held much interest for her when she feared where her next meal would come from.

She had never noticed anyone's body as she noticed his. At first, she believed it merely an appreciation of his strength and training. He had the body of a warrior. It was admirable. But when she felt the desire to touch, she knew it was something more, something terrifying to consider. He was a murderer, her enemy; she should be ashamed of the desires she held for the Supreme Leader. At least, that was what the darkness told her. She had ignored it on Kamino when she had felt drawn to him in his vulnerability. She ignored it then, as he lay unconscious in her lap.

In a gesture she hoped conveyed to the sleeping man what his life meant to her, she kissed her thumb and pressed it to his lips. They were softer than she imagined and achingly warm. If he had only been awake, she wondered what she would have done in that moment. The thought excited her that there was more to try with him. She knew she was supposed to hate him, but she couldn't find it in herself to do it. There was no room for hate when the light was bubbling up from inside her. There was something about him that she couldn't explain – something more connecting him to her than she understood. What she did know was he was changing, restoring a cautious hope in him. “Wake up, Ben,” she whispered as she trailed her thumb over his lips, a fire awakening inside her, drawing her to him.

Instead of his awakening, the Force crackled and vibrated around her. She knew he would be taken back across the galaxy within seconds. She turned to the droid. “Blue, promise me you’ll get him help on the –”

And as quickly as he appeared – she would be forever grateful the Force had brought her to his side in that moment of desperation – he was gone. The corridor was empty. Her heart hammered against
her rib cage as she jumped to her feet. *What am I supposed to do?*

She had been concerned about his condition when he had been safe in her lap. Without him, she was terrified. What if he needed further treatment before they reached the **Finalizer**? What if he stopped breathing? What if they didn't get him to the medbay? The more she examined the possibilities and considered the unknowns, the more she panicked.

In his absence, the moment that she had rounded the corner toward her room and found him crumpled on the floor replayed in agonizing detail. His unnatural position had been confirmation of her fears. She remembered her gasp, her halted steps, and the terror that had sunk deep in her stomach. For a split-second, she had feared he was dead. Watching his eyes blink open, even if they were unfocused and heavy, made her believe in the miracles of the Cosmic Force.

She had known it was dire before she felt his pain fade, before she saw the pool of blood chasing the cracks in the temple floor. His skin had lost its color, his body was convulsing. She had seen him unconscious before, but that... that was different. Kylo was a fighter, but his injuries dragged him from the conscious plain with ease. The minutes stretched longer each time she had tried to revive him, and she feared the next time she lost him, she would lose him for good. It was undoubtedly clear that he was quickly succumbing to his injuries; she'd seen enough death to last a lifetime in the harsh sands of Jakku. Acquaintances and strangers, good people and plenty of morally corrupt, she had witnessed enough of the living gasping their last breaths to know what death looked like.

Rey was certain; Kylo had nearly died across the galaxy from her. Alone. If she hadn't found the medpac, she would have watched him slowly succumb to his injuries, and she would have been helpless to stop it. As deeply as she wished to forget, he was the Supreme Leader. There were worlds of people who wanted him dead, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. What would happen if she wasn't there the next time? What if his injuries were instantly fatal? What if there was no medpac? They had been **lucky**, but they weren't out of danger yet.

He was unconscious, somewhere across the galaxy, and she wasn't there to help him. Normal people didn't pass out. She hated it. **Hated** it. If he had just **turned**, come back to the Resistance with her, he would be there in the corridor with her instead of the bloodstains drying on the stone floor. With a shout of anger, she kicked the crimson dirt over the stains. The darkness pressed insistently at her energy, and in her fear and anger and exhaustion, she allowed it in. The darkness would numb her. She couldn't live with the fear, the tightness in her chest at the thought that one day he wouldn't be there anymore. Not when Ben Solo was so close to coming back to her.

Rey paced up and down the corridor, waiting for the Force to reconnect them. She was grateful that most of the other members had left for a mission led by Finn to the base for supplies. The corridors were empty, and her secret was safe for another day. But perhaps, there wouldn't have to be many more days she had to wait. The man who nearly died in her arms was not the one who chose power
over her in the throne room. If he woke, when he woke, he would find a way to bring them together, she believed that. But the wait until then would be excruciating. She walked past an empty alcove of rooms, hesitating when she heard a strange voice. She thought she had been alone on that side of the temple. She listened closer, and the voice was speaking in an even stranger language.

“Hopa?” The voice chuckled. It was a deep, terrible thing. “Tee-tocky sa creeda. Oto doe choba, Colonel Dameron.”

Rey edged closer, the Force drawing her toward the conversation. She couldn't put a finger on what, but something was off. She trusted the Force, and she trusted her intuition even more. She startled when she heard Poe's voice echo into the corridor.

“I don't recall me wasting your time before,” Poe said, his voice much louder than the first voice. He must be on a holocall. But who would he risk contacting when the First Order could trace our transmissions? “Name your price, the Resistance is at your mercy.” A burrowing dread settled in her stomach.

Rey knew that Leia was sending communications across the galaxy in search of allies. If Leia was the brains of the Resistance, then he was the heart. Everything he did was for the good of the Resistance. So why did this conversation concern her? Was she projecting her own fears of being caught with Kylo? Poe could be talking to anyone. Nothing he said was cause for the unsettled feeling that became increasingly more difficult to ignore. But something inside told her to pay attention, that this conversation was important. And that intuition meant more to her than her rationalizations. It had saved her life countless times in the unforgiving conditions on Jakku; she had no reason to stop listening to it now.

She was nearly upon the room when she heard chipper beeps of an astromech droid. Breathing a sigh of relief, she turned, expecting Blue. She couldn't find it in her heart to be disappointed, however, as Beebee-Ate rolled around the corner. He issued a series of whistles in binary as a friendly greeting to Rey. She knelt next to him and used her smokey grey shirt to wipe dust from around his sensor. Hearing the astromech droid conversing with someone, Poe stepped out of the room, startled when he noticed her.

“Rey,” he breathed, running his hand through his dark, curly hair. “What are you doing here?” He looked nervous. Why is he nervous? She looked past him toward the room, and he leaned his arm against the temple wall, effectively blocking her view of the room.

“I thought I heard talking,” she answered. There was something about his smile that earned another warning from her intuition. She had spent enough time around sly and deceitful characters on Jakku. Those experiences implored her not to trust him. This isn't Kylo, she chided herself, you're
"Talking?" he paused, scratching the back of his head. "It's only me and Beebee-Ate back here. But, speaking of talking, I thought I heard you talking with someone earlier in the corridor?" Rey glared at him. She knew the game he was playing; her bondmate was an expert in equivocation and counter-questioning. It caught her off guard that this man would use the same tactic, but he was leading them down a troubling path, so she deflected.

"Nope, just me. Okay, well, enjoy your... alone time." She patted Beebee-Ate goodbye and loudly stepped around the corner of the alcove and down the corridor. She had no intention of allowing the clandestine meeting to occur in privacy, however. After a safe distance, she quietly tip-toed back to the alcove, stepping close enough to overhear more of the conversation.


Poe spoke again, his words flowing fast and smooth as he worked to gain the other man's favor. "Yes, it was her, but it's fine; she knows nothing." They are. They're talking about me. Why would Poe want me to know nothing? Who exactly are we begging for help?

"Jeeka doe Jedai hotshuh neechu. Mo nobata bargon," the voice growled in return. Whatever he was saying, it was clear it was a warning.

"She won't be a problem. You have my word," Poe said. Rey's stomach dropped. Who was this man, and why did it sound as if he hated the Jedi? What was happening? The Resistance was the good side. What was Poe keeping from her? Was Leia part of the secret too? Whom could she trust? It terrified her that the face that came to mind after that thought was Kylo.

"E chu ta," the voice chuckled again. "Cheekta mo gootu nopa, Colonel Dameron. Cheekta mo gootu nopa."

There was a noise from the alcove, perhaps Beebee-Ate rolling around, but she took off running. When she had reached the dead-end of a long corridor, she backed herself against the dirt-covered walls. "E chu ta..." she whispered. Where had she heard that before?

"E chu ta?" A hoarse voice groaned from the empty room to the left.
“Ben!” She sprinted into the room, still panting from running earlier, and skidded into his side. There were two armed guards standing by the door, but he wasn’t noticeably panicked that they saw her. Blue sat loyally next to him, chirping to himself as he practiced shocking the medical droid.

She wanted to embrace him and tell him how profoundly she feared for his life, but there would be an abundance of time for that. He had given her the vial on Kamino, he had told her how he was tired of the path he had chosen, he had changed, and now – as he recovered from almost losing his life – she knew he had realized what he wanted, she knew in her heart he would turn. They would no longer be forced to be enemies; they could figure it out together.

His deep voice interrupted her thoughts. “I didn't know you were one to curse.”

“What?”

“Don't look so scandalized,” he winced as he sat on a medbay gurney somewhere on the Finalizer. “You said, 'E chu ta,' did you not? I don't know much in Huttese, but I do know the curse words.”

The cold dread in her stomach reemerged with his words. “Huttese? As in, the Hutts?”

“Yes...” His mood was the brightest she had ever seen, but it darkened as he sensed her own tumultuous emotions. “Rey, is something wrong?”

_The Hutts...who hate the Jedi. No, it’s impossible. Poe wouldn’t. Leia wouldn’t._

Rey had heard the notorious stories from off-worlders on Jakku. The Hutts had committed atrocious crimes. Murder, slavery, unspeakable cruelties in the form of entertainment— they were concerned with one thing and one thing only; wealth. They were no better than the First Order. Worse, perhaps.

The Resistance, the good side, would never form an alliance with them. Would they? Was winning a war worth aligning themselves with an organization as evil as the very people they fought against? No, Leia would never allow it. The Hutts enslaved her, nearly killed Luke, froze her husband in Carbonite. No, it couldn't be. That was not the cause she was fighting for. Rey must have heard wrong. Or, if Kylo knew the term, then so must many others. Perhaps the unknown ally had only used the term because it was something Poe would recognize. Rey had already opened the floodgates to the darkness. It found her easily then, in her distrustful fear, allowing it to suppress
the something deep inside that begged her to hold it at bay.

Chapter End Notes

Mild fear of death

Rey touches Kylo with ambiguous consent in today's standards
Concordia Fallout

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

---CHAPTER 36---
“Rey?”

“Yes? Sorry, I was... how are you?” She offered him a smile, but her eyes didn't follow. His stomach clenched at her pretense. What had happened? What had he done? His words may have broken her from whatever inner conflict she struggled with, but this wasn't the Rey he had seen only moments ago. Only moments ago, to him, he supposed. He had awoken in the medbay, having no idea how he had gotten there or how long he had been unconscious. It could have been hours. Could she be upset with him for that?

*Don’t confuse her saving your life for caring for you.*

Still, there was something more, something darker clouding her energy. Her light had been nearly untainted earlier, but now he could feel the weight of her darkness. Had he done that to her? Was that the effect he had on her?

“I'm fine,” he whispered. “I... uh... Thank you... for your medical assistance.” It sounded pathetic to his own ears, but words of gratitude were not well-practiced. Ostensibly, neither was she well-practiced in accepting gratitude, if the blush spreading across her cheeks was any indication. A true smile blessed her face, for only a fleeting moment, before faltering under the shadow of darkness.

She surprised him by stepping forward and tugging at his blood-soaked tunic, searching for his wounds. “How does it look? Have they treated you yet?”

“There wasn't much left for them to do, but I'm fine,” he assured her. There was a tightness in her shoulders and a pinch in her brow. She didn't look very reassured. She was running her hands over the tunic, blood dripping from her hands as she pulled them away.

She stared up into his eyes, searching them for something important. The emotions in her own eyes were disquieting. “Ben, how do I know you’re real?” He thought he had misheard her, or perhaps his brain was still recovering from blood loss, he was so taken aback by her question.

“I... what?”

“How do I know you didn't die? You could be an apparition in the Force, like Luke. He appeared no different to me than you are right now. You could have died when you disappeared, and now you're lying to me because you know how much your death would hurt me. You can't be okay,
there must have been a wound we missed. There's blood on your shoulders, Ben! There's too much blood for you to be okay. How did I not see it before... ”

His lips twitched at her concern. “It’s okay. It’s not all my blood.” Her entire body was trembling; he could sense her thoughts on overdrive through the bond. She was panicking. The darkness was overwhelming her in her fear; he was nearly choking on its density. He watched as she stilled, almost as if she were listening to something... or someone.

It was a ridiculous notion, because he was the only one with voices in his head, and those voices were dead. He turned, wondering if she was listening to someone else, but there was no one else in the room save the two mandatory stormtroopers he would deal with later. He had already commanded them into silence. His gloved hand grasped hers, stilling them. Her eyes snapped back to his instead of the soiled tunic, but they were darker than he had ever seen, the golden flecks dimmed into empty pools; it was as if someone else was looking back at him.

“I’m not dead, Rey. Not yet, at least. Close your eyes,” he murmured, moving her hand to the wound on his side. He manipulated the Force through her, dragging her into the deeper levels, focusing on the damage done by the blaster bolt. The plasma had torn through tissue and muscle, but he was otherwise lucky it missed internal organs. Blood was no longer streaming from the wound, and the cells around the injury were bright in the Force as the Bacta repaired him. He showed her the rest of his functioning circulatory system through the Force, focusing on his steady heartbeat. He allowed her to see this vulnerable side; the blood pumped evenly from his heart and his lungs expanded and contracting with ease. When he looked up at her, it wasn’t relief that twisted across her face, so he released her.

“See? The wound is on the mend. My vitals are elevated but normal, and, more importantly, proof of life. I’m alive, and I’ll survive this.” She still seemed skeptical as she ran her hand over the tunic. “Rey, that’s not my blood,” he assured her again. Her demeanor changed, though her fear hadn’t subsided. She stepped back, her eyes boring into his. The darkness flooded into their connection, forcing him to secure barriers in his mind, so he wouldn’t be overwhelmed by its strength. It was something he hadn’t felt in her since before he left for Kamino.

“What did you do? You controlled my mind!” she shouted. He watched her side of the bond fall deeper into the cloud of darkness, he could feel the transition in her. He was losing her to the darkness again.

*Control your mind? I couldn’t even if I wanted. Do you have any idea how strong you are?* 

He searched her eyes, but he couldn’t find the source of her sudden darkness. “What just happened to you?”
“You tell me, *Supreme Leader,*” she snapped back. It was as if Rey was gone and the woman before Kamino stood in her place. He couldn’t understand what had changed in her from a moment prior. How could the darkness consume her so quickly?

“I guided you deeper into the Force,” he explained in exasperation. “To prove I’m not dead. You were rambling about Force ghosts.”

“Don’t ever do that again.” Her voice wavered in agitation, weakening the strength of her demand. “I don’t need your darkness guiding my mind to do anything.”

“Clearly,” he sighed, eying her pointedly. He just wanted her to return to the woman with the powerful light that he had only seen glimpses of in recent days. He should want the darkness. He *should* encourage it. But he couldn’t bring himself to want it. “Look, I can teach you, if you –”

“I don’t want you to teach me anything!”

His anger spiked, matching hers in the bond. “You were panicking over the blood, all I did was… show you… it wasn’t… mine!”

*Luke is dead. How do you expect to learn about the Force if you won’t allow me to teach you! You fear my darkness, but you are the one suffocating the bond with yours.*

Her eyes flashed with renewed fear. “Then, whose blood is it?”

“Does it matter?” he studied her carefully, buying himself time to figure out just where the darkness was coming from. And why she seemed so distracted, why her eyes would become distant as if she were listening. He knew it was likely due to his own experiences, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that there was someone else talking to her. Was it *Luke?*

“I know you're avoiding the answer,” her tone was as cutting as her stare. “I'm no fool.”

He gently skimmed the surface of her mind for the source of the darkness, but the fear and anger that fed it was not strong enough for the darkness he felt. This was something else. “I never said you were.”
“You implied it.”

Rey would not let it go that easily; he knew that, but he let the dice fall where they may. “Did I?”

Blue, who had been watching the exchange with about as much confusion as he had felt, finally spoke up. Kylo sighed; he doubted that the droid informing her that Kylo did it to protect her would deescalate the situation for her.

“Whose...blood...is it?” Her voice was nearly unrecognizable with the weight of the darkness. He paused before answering, closing his eyes with a long-suffering sigh. If she had become unreasonably angry about him guiding her with the Force, he knew this would not end well.

“The Concordians.”

“What did you do?” Her voice trembled as she searched his eyes for an answer. He knew she wouldn't like what she found. How foolish he had been to believe the animosity had changed at all between them.

“What did I do? The last time I checked, I was the one lying in the medbay.”

She was quiet for a moment, lost to her own thoughts. She closed her eyes as if she were trying to shut out everything from the room. He recognized it in himself when he was a boy. Was he doing this to her? Was it his darkness? Or his bleak thoughts? Could she hear them all? What was their bond doing to her? The power of the darkness in her was beautiful in its ferocity, but that was exactly why he should learn to shut her out. He would only destroy what she was. He destroyed everything else.

“Who are the Concordians, and why is their blood all over you?” she finally managed.

“They were a small tribe on Mandalore’s moon.” He attempted to keep his tone calm and even, to give her no extra fuel for her overwhelming darkness. “A radical faction of Mandalorians who had been exiled there and were presumed dead. Their warriors attacked the Mandalorians, to gain access to long-range transportation. Rey, they left me no choice.”
The embers of her anger were reignited with every reply. “You couldn’t have forced them back into exile?”

*In a perfect universe, maybe, but it’s not. You know how uncivilized worlds operate. On a planet where their moral compass is for sale to the highest bidder, when loyalty and sanctity of life are considered weaknesses, there can be no negotiation. They would betray the sanctions the moment our ships broke atmo. The only choice was which lives would be lost, and I can live with them over the alternative. I have no remorse for what I had to do.*

“No,” he replied instead, holding her glare. “Before we landed, I was made aware that they claimed to have information regarding the location of the Resistance. The transportation they needed would be used to intercept you on whatever planet you’re hiding. I had to kill them all.”

“All?”

He knew with that one word that the fragile cordiality that had miraculously developed between them on Kamino would be irrevocably shattered. Her eyes hardened as she stared at him as if he were... *a creature in a mask, a murderous snake, a monster.*

“I couldn’t let them find you,” he whispered. His eyes begged her for understanding, but her eyes flared with enmity.

“Then you shouldn’t have put a five million credit bounty on my head!” He winced as she screamed at him, the darkness suffocating the Force around them. He braced himself for the fight it would inevitably devolve into. He rolled his shoulder on his wounded side, assessing his strength in anticipation.

“Please, Rey, I had no choice,” his voice broke as he pleaded with the mask of darkness on her face.

“Stop saying that,” she growled. “You did have a choice. You could have not put a bounty on me or my friends... on your own mother. You could have chosen not to ‘kill them all.’ What does that mean? How many of them?”

He closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to witness the emotions in hers. “I think I was clear enough the first time.”
Her uneasiness and disappointment shuddered through the bond. Part of him wished she had never healed him. He could have died content, believing that she didn't hate him. “What about the ones that didn’t go to Mandalore?”

“I did not go to Mandalore. Hux had intel that the situation on Concordia was under control. It was supposed to be an information-seeking mission while his troops quelled the rebellion on Mandalore as necessary,” he replied, working his jaw in agitation. “His intel was wrong. It was not under control. I was forced to eliminate the problem on Concordia. I meant it when I said all of them.”

“What about the women and the children?” Her voice pleaded with him to deny what she knew to be true. He ran his hands upward over his face and clenched them in his hair in frustration.

_I had to. They used them against us. Some lured the troopers into an ambush by feigning surrender. Some were strapped with thermal detonators and thrown into our ranks like garbage. Children barely old enough to stand took up blaster rifles against us. Why do you think I was injured? I let my guard down, I never thought a child..._

_This wasn’t how war was supposed to be. They screamed their propaganda like the little brainwashed soldiers they had become. They had all become soldiers. They had to be eliminated like soldiers. The Concordians were raised to desire two things: credits and watching the galaxy burn. There was no saving them. If I left anyone alive, they would have killed the Mandalorians, the Resistance, anyone who stood in their way. They all knew your whereabouts. I had to kill them all._

“What do you think Luke would have done?” he asked bitterly. “Killing children for the sake of the galaxy? Certainly, he would have approved; he did try to kill his own nephew. Unfortunately for you, he wasn’t as thorough as I am. I did what I had to do. I would do whatever was necessary to protect you.”

“No, you don't get to bring Luke into this – ”

“– Don't I? He is your master, after all –”

“– And don’t you dare put a massacre on my hands, Supreme Leader!”

“Rey, they would have killed your friends,” he reasoned in desperation to drive away the darkness.
“If I let them go, they would have found you all or traded information of your whereabouts to the highest bidder. Believe it or not, there are much worse organizations than the First Order in the galaxy.”

She was quiet a moment, and he thought she understood, but the wave of darkness that crashed over the bond convinced him otherwise. “Did you kill them?”

“No all.”

“A child?” She stumbled on her words as she forced them from her lips. She cringed as she spoke, and he knew she was reluctant to hear the answer. Not nearly as reluctant as he was to tell her. He puffed out his cheeks, refusing to meet her pleading stare. The best he could do was nod. Her voice broke as she asked, “Why?”

“I told you –”

“Your brainwashed stormtroopers could have done it,” her tone sharpened as she spoke. “Or the red-headed general. Or some superweapon on the Finalizer. Why did you kill them?”

He leveled a bitter stare into her fierce eyes. “Why wouldn’t I?” I’m a monster.

“That’s not an answer!” she shot back. Neither had a lightsaber, but they were dueling, injuring each other all the same. Kylo could feel the darkness flooding his own veins. He didn’t care to fight it any longer.

“What do you want me to say? That is what I am, all I know how to be. It’s all I’m good at,” he growled harshly, his resentment getting the better of him. She hated him, what did he care if she hated him more? He would give her a good reason to hate him. “It is the only thing that makes sense anymore. It makes me feel alive.” First, he felt the overwhelming darkness. Her darkness. Then he felt the Force spike as Rey’s quarterstaff landed in her hand. Before he could react, the staff connected with his upper abdomen. He hissed as a sharp pain radiated from his ribs. She cried out, and he realized with a slight satisfaction that an identical pain must be spreading across her own abdomen.

“What is wrong with you!” she screamed.
He tried to appeal to her logic. “What would you have done?”

She ignored his question. “I can't believe I almost….” she caught herself before she finished. He could sense her preparing to strike again. His hand shot out and he summoned the z6 riot control baton from one of the armed troopers in the room. Her staff connected with the baton as it sparked to life.

He held his hand out to the two stormtroopers as he held off her assault with the other. “You will leave this room and forget about this woman and our conversation.” In his distraction, she thrust the staff through his defenses and hit him in his wounded side. He grit his teeth through the pain, closing his eyes to suppress the nausea. He ducked as he sensed a warning in the Force.

The staff barely missed his head. He shoved her back roughly with the Force, enough to give him the opportunity to stand. The woman truly was a walking contradiction as much as he was. She called him a liar one moment then offered him her hand the next. She tossed him his grandfather's lightsaber to save himself from the guard, then summoned it to kill him after he had bared his soul to her. She had screamed at him that she wanted him to die in her temple room, then begged him not to jump on Kamino. Now she was driving her weapon into the very wound she had been desperate to treat herself.

“No! You killed innocents! Children! You did it because you enjoyed it! You're just like your grandfather!” My grandfather? She swung the staff low and nearly knocked him off his feet. “I thought you had changed! You created the clones! You gave me the vial to end it all! You said you wanted to leave the First Order! Why is it every time you start finding your way back to the light, you do the most evil thing you can think of to prove everyone wrong!”

Her well-practiced strikes came in quick succession; his exhausted muscles could barely maneuver the baton to block each swipe. Not that he was incapable of drawing enough strength from the darkness to give himself a better chance at fighting her, but he was more concerned with concentrating on the growing darkness he sensed inside her. His intuition blared alarms that whatever he sensed in her was dangerous, but he couldn’t determine why.

He found that it took little mental effort to block each strike, but it was more than guidance from the Force. This was the bond. It reminded him of the throne room. Every move he made was countered perfectly by her, and then his weapon landed in the precise location in the precise
movement to match her thrust. There had been a time when he could anticipate the moves of the two other students he was closest to in the Jedi academy – it was still painful, still too real, to give life to their names – but it had been nothing like this. In those days, he learned quickly from their fighting style and overpowered them. Rey, however, would always be his equal.

The fluidity and efficiency of their moves was not anticipation after years of practice, it was almost… precognition. Somehow, he knew exactly where her blade would be. It was a well-practiced dance that was new to them both. Though he barely had the strength to physically wield the baton, he had little fear that she would find him wanting. He was there to meet every strike as if he were a part of her, and she met his every parry as if she were a part of him. It wasn’t a perfect stalemate, however, the weapons were mismatched and he was less limber on his injured side. When a well-timed thrust of the end of her staff connected with his chest, she winced in pain and he decided he’d had enough. He threw the baton to the side, manipulating the Force to freeze her arm mid-swing.

“Stop!” He held his hands up, palms out, as on offer of truce. “Please!”

Her eyes burned with contempt as she struggled against his oppressive hold. The depth of the darkness he sensed intensifying inside her startled him. She was nearly pure light; that level of darkness in her was impossible, yet he could feel its cold grasp twist through the bond, overpowering her. There was something oddly terrifying in his awareness. The longer they were connected, the more darkness he felt. It had to be their bond.

Why can’t you see, I did this for you? If I didn’t issue the bounty, Hux would have, and he would not have specified them as “capture only.” And I had to eliminate the Concordians. They had no desire for order or peace. They only want to destroy, and they had their sights set on you. What did you expect me to do? Sit by as leader of the Known Galaxy and allow them to take you?

Before he could find the words to express his thoughts, Rey summoned the strength to break through his hold. Instead of manipulating the Force again, he threw the weapon to the floor. He stood open and defenseless to her attack. He closed himself off from their bond, testing whether it would affect their shared pain. The only sound in the room was their heavy breaths and the steady drip of blood leaking from his reopened wound.

“Pick it up,” she demanded, gesturing to the baton. “Fight me!” It was an echo of their first argument after Crait.

“No.” He turned, searching through a cabinet for more Bacta pads to re-dress his wound. He knew how it incited her when he turned his back on her, but he did it anyway. He dared her to summon her blaster again. Instead, he sensed the movement of her staff as she swung it down upon him. It connected with the back of his shoulders, but it did little to incapacitate him, not with the
adrenaline still hurtling through his veins. On her next swing, he pivoted and easily caught it. He grasped it tightly as she tried to wrench it away. Towering over her, intimidating only in his stature. He knew his face was twisted in misery, his weakness evident as his body trembled fiercely.

"Let go!" she growled through gritted teeth. “Let me end this.” As profoundly as he wanted to rip it away, dare her to raise a blaster on him again, he’d had enough of that hell for one day. Kylo had no doubt she could kill him with a well-placed strike to the head – she was proficient enough with the weapon – but that sounded like a more peaceful way to die than another blaster wound. He released his grasp on the staff and stepped back, still within the staff’s range but far enough for her to easily see his face.

“Do it. The traitor isn't here to fight for your honor this time.” Was it foolish to further incite her? Likely. But he had been backed into a corner, defending himself, his entire life. If this was what she wanted, then he would make it worth it.

Without hesitation, she thrust the staff into his abdomen. He doubled over as the impact forced the air from his lungs. The world around him whited-out for a moment as the blinding pain overshadowed all else. When he regained awareness, he was collapsing to the floor. She stood over him, unfazed. As he had predicted, the closed-off connection had prevented not only emotional feeling from traveling across the bond, but physical as well.

Kylo remained on his knees, head bowed, focused on centering his breathing rather than responding with the impulsive aggression that bubbled just below the surface. He could hurt her; the darkness called him to end the fight quickly with violence. *It would be so easy.* Instead, he did what he had done from the moment they met: he weathered the pain she had inflicted upon him.

Her eyes were fixed upon his stilled form; he could feel them burning into him, but he refused to return her glare: “You see me for what I am. Is this it, then? Is this when you’ve finally lost hope in me?” he asked through rasped breaths. It was everything he had convinced himself he wanted. From the moment he met her, he wanted her – the physical embodiment of hope – to see exactly who he was. He wanted her to see *why* he had become the monster she hated. If she still held contempt for him then, perhaps it would have been easier to let go of the dream that had haunted him his entire life. There were moments when he thought she might have seen him for what he had become, and still understood him. He thought maybe the dream *was* real. He was wrong.

To believe she finally lost hope in him – knowing him, yet deeming him broken beyond repair – ripped him apart in ways he had never imagined. The façade of the Supreme Leader fell away momentarily as tears stung his tired eyes – born of a lifetime of suffering and delivering suffering onto others. Kneeling at her feet, he lifted his head to meet her glare as the bond rippled with hatred. *No, not hatred,* he realized as he searched her eyes. *Disappointment.*
It immediately reminded him of their brief connection on Crait. He had been on his knees before her then as well, but he had been lost – weak and defeated – as he had stared up her, begging her to explain why *she* had betrayed him like the others. In those moments of hollow brokenness after finding his father’s dice, he supposed he would have gone with her if she had asked him. But she didn’t want him like he wanted her; she had shut him out instead. He had been unbalanced then, after nearly killing her and his mother in his anger. He had been shattering under the weight of what he had done.

But not this time. This time he would not beg; he would feel no remorse for doing what was necessary to save her life. She had no qualms over him killing his own master for her – his only father figure for the last six years, someone he was loyal to and sacrificed everything for, someone whom he had thought actually believed in him – but evidently a village of militant terrorists was too far for her when it came to saving her life. Clearly, she had no idea what he had done before.

Standing above him, her eyes may have reminded him of the ones on Crait, but he sensed the same conflict in her as he had on Starkiller as he lay supine, blood staining the surrounding snow. She was contemplating whether to strike him down. He held her stare. He would not make it easy for her. She searched for something in his eyes – something redeeming, he supposed – but he knew she wouldn’t find it.

It was too late. The boy he was before died long ago at a burning temple. All that was left was the monster they all feared. He had gone too far to turn back and not far enough to let go. As long as he was bonded to her, the anchor from her light dragged him away from the darkness, but as long as she was bonded to him, the anchor from his darkness dragged him toward it. The peace Snoke promised did not exist.

“Do it,” he said. “This will never end. Peace is a lie, there will be no peace. Not for me, and as long as you’re bonded to me, not for you either.”

Blue – who had been quiet in the wake of their fight – rolled forward between Rey and Kylo. The droid begged her not to hurt him, as if Kylo was someone worth saving. Her eyes flashed down to the droid, but the pleas fell on deaf ears. He could feel her darkness and the warnings in the Force. Rey shut her eyes and shook her head, and it could have been in response to what he said. But he felt that odd awareness again as if she was fighting against something he couldn’t see. When she reopened her eyes, he recognized the conflict within them well.

“You should have just let me go,” he whispered. Kylo awaited another strike of her staff, the energized beam of a blaster, a wave of Force crashing upon him – the judgment he deserved for his crimes – but it never came. The darkness in her eyes faded enough for the golden flecks to return; there was still a fire in them, a ferocity, but it wasn’t the cruelty of the darkness. A lone tear was hastily swiped away, and she tossed her staff aside. His throat tightened. He wouldn’t feel remorse. She could hate him, but he wouldn’t regret saving her from their wrath.
“Why!” she screamed, turning from him to cry out into the room. “Why can’t I be what they want me to be! Why can’t I kill you!” He bowed his head as the Force vibrated around them, choosing not to further witness the disappointment in her eyes as she faded away across the galaxy. The tightness in his throat only intensified. He refused to feel remorse. *Refused.*

**Chapter End Notes**

**Violence**

Rey and Kylo fight. Rey is not nice in her darkness. This will be a common theme in
the next few chapters. Don't listen to the darkness, kids.
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Kylo closed his eyes as he sat alone in the medbay, floating in a state between consciousnesses and oblivion. There was a med-droid hovered beside him, silent as she stabbed another injector into his wounded side. At least the droid didn't question how he had reopened the wound. There was another flash of pain as the droid cauterized the wound, but he was too distracted by reanalyzing the fight with Rey to focus on it.

It didn’t make sense. He wasn’t angry with her for what she had done, but he was more concerned with the darkness he had sensed in her. Was it him? Was it their bond? Had he done this to her? Or, was it something else? Was it Luke twisting her thoughts? He had sensed the height of her darkness on Starkiller, but that was nothing like he felt in her as she contemplated killing him moments prior. How was that possible? How could someone so good have a darkness that rivaled even Sidious? It shouldn’t have surprised him, he conceded. Luke had always said, "powerful light, powerful darkness." She was strong and powerful in ways he had never witnessed before, her light purer than anything he had ever felt. Certainly, her darkness would be as well.

This darkness was what he had wanted from the moment they had first met, when she immediately tried to kill him. Wasn’t it? Her strength of light and moments of darkness intrigued him, and he only wished for her to stop lying to herself and embrace it. She was in every way his equal, she could challenge him in ways no one else could. But this? This was different, and he couldn’t determine why – not until he read that text and witnessed that vision. The Force had warned him, and the historical text had shown him what would happen if she fell. It wasn’t the fantasy he’d had of her joining him.

Kylo saw the truth of it already; she was not Rey like that. Since Crait, he had seen brief moments of Rey, of her forgiveness, compassion, and hope, but then the darkness dragged her under its control again. She could fall; could become him. He found he didn’t want that. No matter how far he had fallen, no matter how profoundly he still wished she had joined him, he knew what the darkness would do to her. With the threat of Sidious’s return, it only bolstered his resolve. It was too late for him, but he couldn’t allow what he had endured at the hands of Sidious to happen to her as well.

“Ren!” his general's harsh voice sliced through the silence. The clicking of boots echoed down the corridor toward him. Blue shuddered in fear at the anger in his voice, rolling away to hide in the corner. Kylo groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. He reluctantly opened his eyes, forcing himself back to reality as Hux burst into the room in his typical melodramatic style. Kylo's hand shifted to his belt instinctively as he noticed the bright red hue of his general's face. “What have you done!”
“Isn’t that the question of the day,” he answered dryly, too exhausted to be offended by Hux’s boldness. The general vibrated in fury, his bright blue eyes alight with an intensity that bordered on homicidal. If Hux was Force-sensitive, Kylo had no doubt the Force would be tightening around his throat. “I am assuming this is concerning your failure on Concordia? They lied about the location.”

“Concor... What? Yes...No,” he spat. “Arkanis!”

_Ah, yes. The weapons test has been successful, then._

Kylo had gone into battle on no sleep, fought in said battle, probed a man’s mind, been shot, survived, and endured a fight with Rey. Kylo didn’t know if he had the strength to weather anything else, especially from a man that made him consider murder every time he entered the same room.

Who cares about your useless planet when Rey...

No, he wouldn't allow her to dominate his thoughts, even as the agitation grew. Nothing made sense anymore. He wanted to unleash the anger built inside him, scream, destroy, tear the room apart. Perhaps a game of wills with Hux _was_ the perfect distraction. “Did it fail?”

Hux could only stutter and huff in response. “What!”

“Did... it... fail,” he sighed. “Pay attention, General. I can repeat the words, but I can’t understand them for you.”

“The entire planet has been reduced to ash!”

“I don't understand,” he said with feigned ignorance. “It was merely a very, very thorough weapons test on an abandoned Imperial Academy. If it was a success, then why are you here?” He lit the fuse and waited, curious about what would happen when Hux exploded. To his general's credit, he had much greater restraint than Kylo. The next few words were mostly incoherent sputters and curse words in several languages, some of which were surprisingly creative. Kylo cleared his throat to suppress a chuckle. His general interpreted it as disapproval and composed himself, his disciplined calm quickly returning, before he noticed the flash of amusement in Kylo's eyes. The redness returned as his temper flared.
“Are you an idiot or just insane?” his general screamed, regaining his ability to articulate words. Hux vibrated with rage, hands clenched tightly in fists at his side. Kylo felt a slight twitch of a smirk on the corner of his lips as the other man realized what he had asked him. Hux rolled his eyes and scoffed. “Don't answer that; it would be an insult to both idiots and the insane.”

“Young hostility is unbecoming, General,” Kylo warned, his voice wavering with a laugh that threatened to break through his defenses. “It was abandoned, correct? You wouldn’t have begun operations again against my orders, would you?” He attempted to harden his increasingly amused expression into impassivity – a task more difficult than he was accustomed to without the aid of his mask. The mask, however, was across the room, any access was blocked by his general.

The man before him desperately struggled to temper his fury, shaking furiously. Kylo hummed thoughtfully. He appreciated the unusual role reversal. “We had to relocate the training facilities from the Supremacy until the reconstruction was finished!”

“Did you? Fascinating. As Supreme Leader, I presumed –wrongly– that I would have been made aware of such decisions. If only I had known...” He spoke slowly, channeling his best imitation of Snoke while holding Hux's glare imperiously. The Force pulsed around him in power and control. “I must be going insane,” he chuckled darkly. “Because I was under the impression I had made it clear that the stormtrooper training program was to be terminated.” His stomach rolled, bile creeping up his throat as he realized just how much he sounded like his former master. He hated it.

The general snorted derisively. “In favor of what? Clones?”

“If it was?”

His general was, if nothing else, perceptive. “I knew you agreed to that diplomatic Kamino trip too readily. You solicited their Clone technologies.” It was not a question.

“If I did?”

“Pray tell, Supreme Leader, who would you clone to create an entire army? Yourself? Me?” Kylo shuddered at the thought of millions of Hux clones terrorizing him. It would be his own personal Hell. “Sidious? Or maybe the Jedi girl; she’s powerful enough to defeat you, after all.”

“Enough.”
“What do you plan to do for the next ten years while the clones are developed?” Hux had reassumed his haughty and condescending tone, stepping closer to Kylo in confidence. With only a little more than a meter between the two men, Kylo stood. When he was seated for the droid's medical treatment, the closer proximity would have forced him to tilt his head up to meet the general's stare. He would have none of that.

“Technology has advanced greatly since the Clone Wars, General. They have developed the ability to splice DNA of non-human species into the clone DNA, resulting in non-human life cycles. These clones reach adult size and mental capacity within weeks rather than years. And clones no longer require extensive training. Due to new clone development procedures, they can be 'programmed', if you will, subconsciously with all the propaganda and training you waste years on with your recruits. It only takes weeks for them to develop muscle memory with physical training. It is more efficient in every way.”

“You destroyed my father's legacy. For clones...”

“If his legacy was that important to you, perhaps you shouldn't have killed him,” Kylo replied flatly.

Hux’s eyes grew wide before he stammered. “How did you...”

“You may be resistant to persuasion, but your thoughts are loud,” Kylo said, allowing Hux to insinuate what he would. “Regardless, I did you a favor. If it wasn't us, it would have been the Resistance. This is why Snoke believed in a mega-class dreadnought instead of a planet as our headquarters. The moment we take permanent residence on a planet, we open the First Order to attack. The Resistance does not need the morale boost this bombing would have provided them. It had to be done.”

With that, he pushed past his general, grabbed his helmet and stepped out into the corridor. “Blue!” he shouted, and the droid skidded around the corner to follow him.

He felt... more stable after his discussion with Hux. After what he witnessed on Concordia and the resulting fight with Rey, it was a relief to have some control again.

“Ren, this conversation is not over,” Hux began but Kylo would have none of his insubordination.
“Isn’t it?” His tone was curt as he turned to stare down the general until he lowered his eyes submissively. Both men knew Kylo would use the Force if necessary, so the general reluctantly surrendered. “Your stormtrooper program has been terminated in favor of a clone army. End of discussion. Have your men prepare my ship.”

“Where are you going, now?” Hux shouted as he stormed down the corridor.

“Taris.”

Hux apparently lacked self-preservation instincts, because he was stomping after him. “What is on Taris?”

Kylo sighed, disappointed to hear his general still on his heels. “Did you not specify that we lost contact with a freighter outside Taris?”

“We haven’t even talked about Concordia; are you certain they had the wrong location?” he panted breathlessly, falling into stride next to him. Kylo cursed that Hux was also tall; it made it easier for the irritating man to keep pace with him. When Kylo ignored him, he continued, “I have men who will handle the issue on Taris, Supreme Leader, as they did on Mandalore and Felucia.”

He focused on his breathing to avoid Force-shoving Hux into a wall. “And I told you I will handle Taris.”

“You are the Supreme Leader!”

“You have a remarkable grasp of the obvious, General.”

“It is not your role to fight,” Hux seethed. “You are needed here. As the head of the First Order, it is your duty to – ”

Kylo stepped in front of him, turning to block the general with his solid frame. He gradually increased pressure through the Force around Hux's throat as a threat. “Are you allergic to common sense, General?”
“Curious assertion, coming from you,” he rasped.

“Compliance, then?” Kylo placed the helmet over his head as Hux’s nose wrinkled with disgust. “Let me make this clear. I say when the discussion is over. I do not appreciate insubordination.” The weight of the helmet and the medication made him lightheaded for a moment, but he refused to show such weakness before his general. Grasping onto the Force, he used the power of the darkness to regain his strength. “Prepare my ship. End of discussion.”

Still Hux persisted. “If the rebels of the galaxy discovered the Supreme Leader was fighting without the protection of a Star Destroyer, it would be the perfect opportunity to ambush you. It is the opportunity the Resistance has no doubt been waiting for. And what would the First Order do in the wake of your death in an unnecessary battle?”

“If I am killed,” Kylo said, his tone leaving no room for argument. “The throne will be bequeathed to the next highest-ranking official.”

“You have no admiral! You refuse to promote...” Hux paused, sputtering as he realized what Kylo had insinuated. “But that would be – ”

He pushed past him toward the hangar. “– you,” Kylo finished for him, taking full advantage of the general's shock.

“I would like to go on record stating that the Supreme Leader engaging in an irrelevant battle is a foolish decision!” Hux shouted after him.

“Noted,” Kylo growled back without breaking his stride.
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See the end of the chapter for more notes
---CHAPTER 38---
Rey stormed down the corridor, not particularly concerned with where she was going, as much as what she was fleeing from. She had sat in her room for far too long, the vial he had trusted to her in hand, debating whether she would continue to hide it, destroy its contents, or bring it to Leia. In her pathetic weakness, she had hidden it again. She was keeping secrets from the Resistance, just as she had with Luke.

_And that turned out great, didn’t it?_

She still had half a mind to stomp back to her room, grab the vial and hand it over. She could wash her hands of Kylo and his evil. Because it was becoming clear that, for whatever reason, she couldn't kill him herself. She could almost feel the Force stay her hand as she raised her weapon against him. He complicated their interactions further by refusing to fight her. What was she supposed to do with an enemy who refused to behave like an enemy?

Neither was he an ally, however, or any other naïve label she would find herself considering in moments of weakness. She _agonized_ over their connection, but she doubted he even thought of her when they were apart. He claimed everything from a massacre to signing her own death warrant was necessary, but she did not foolishly accept his excuses. She believed the truth was much more self-serving. Kylo had proven to her that he only cared about one thing: power. And, as her enemy, he had every reason to lie to her. Those things he said to her in vulnerable moments, they were all part of his plans to seduce her to darkness. She had felt him entering her mind, attempting to control her before the voice in the Force warned her.

_And it almost worked. What was I thinking?_ There was a small voice inside her, begging her to see the truth, but Rey knew the truth. _He’s a murderer!_

It was simple. Rey wouldn’t turn over the vial, because it would cause more problems between her and the Resistance. She would focus her energy on ending the bond and stopping Kylo Ren and the First Order. It was what she should have done from the beginning, but instead, she had distanced herself from her friends. She had kept them at arm’s length, only allowing them to know her superficially. Rey had always wanted a family, but allowing people in to see the _real_ her was more terrifying than she had imagined. What if they abandoned her? Finn was her rock, the closest person she had ever had to family, yet he only knew the Rey that she showed the rest of the galaxy. They knew the strong-willed, resourceful fighter that defeated Kylo Ren, the stubborn but also forgiving and hopeful woman.

There was another woman underneath, however. She was lonely, uncertain, and quick to temper. She didn't trust anyone, and was so afraid that her friends would leave her if they could see inside her mind. Deep down, she still longed for the love of her family. She was still the same little girl from Jakku. She knew that. Because of the knowledge the bond afforded him, Kylo had never let her forget it, had never allowed her to be the front she presented to everyone else. And when he didn't condemn her for it, but acted like he understood, she found herself trusting him to know her
on a deeper level than anyone had ever known her before. The only person she found she could be herself with, truly be herself, was her enemy. It would only end terribly. She was waiting for a man who would never come back to the light.

It wasn’t the first time she had been a fool, she supposed, for she also waited nearly fifteen years for a family who would never return to her. She had trusted people who never wanted her. And just like them, Kylo had done it too. He had thrown her away in the throne room. He chose galactic domination over her, he continued to choose it. Not that she blamed him; she was nothing. Who could ever love someone like her?

Her feet led her up the temple steps and out into the warm Barkhesh air before she considered her destination. She threw herself down onto the stone in a huff; she was angry at him and the Force and herself. She craved him like she craved her parents, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't let go. It would have been easy if her only draw to him was in denial. Though the longing for both was the same, there was something more profound drawing her to him. The call within her had tried to show her the truth about her parents, but she had refused it. The truth the call inside tried to show her about Kylo was the opposite. It called for her to see the light within him, but that call inside her was wrong. She would have been lost to his lies if it weren’t for the whispers of the Force.

As Rey sat on the temple steps, the darkness of Barkhesh surrounded her. The nightmares would be relentless if she tried to sleep, but she found comfort in the darkness. The predictable invariability of the dark sky was soothing. She wished she had kept track of the number of sleepless nights on Jakku she spent gazing up at the endless expanse of stars. These stars were not the same old friends that she had known on Jakku, but they were beginning to become familiar. The nights on Barkhesh were still spent troubled and desperate for sleep. The cold emptiness of the long dark was still as lonely as ever. The confinement of one planet was traded for another. At least here, she had her friends.

Her mind wandered to Kylo, again. She was still angry with him, but the darkness was fading, leaving only her actions in its wake. The moment she found him crumpled in the corridor replayed like an echo in her mind. She had been terrified; she remembered the agony she felt at almost losing him, the relief she felt when she saved him. How had that devolved into nearly killing him? Because he killed villagers? He had done it before. Was the disappointment she felt that he hadn’t changed as she had hoped enough to consider something she knew in her heart she didn’t want? Did she want it? She didn’t know anymore. She didn’t know who she was; she didn’t know which thoughts were own. Who should she listen to? The voice inside her? The voice in the Force? Him? He told her himself that the whispers in the Force were right, that it was too late for him, that she should let him go.

Rey swiped at her exhausted eyes to erase the evidence of her tears; she’d cried enough over that stupid man to last a lifetime. She stared up at the stars and wondered where he was, what he was doing, if he was thinking of her, too. The lost boy who was lost somewhere in the great vastness of the galaxy. It seemed fitting. She wondered if he was gazing up at the stars on his side of the
Why would he ever care for a girl like you? The Force whispered around her. He is the Supreme Leader, son of Han Solo and Leia Organa, grandson of the Chosen One... And you are a nobody... He doesn’t care... He will continue to kill and destroy because he is evil... He wants to be evil... He will never let you stand in his way... You must destroy him.

Rey wrapped herself in darkness until it numbed away the pain. A mechanical whirring disrupted the silence of the night. She turned to see the joyful astromech droid emerging from the shadows. He never failed to put a smile on her face, as did his master. For once, she was happy for the company.

“Hey!” Rey laughed, running her hands spherical surface of the astromech droid as he bumped into her side. “How’s the antenna holding up?” The droid responded in chipper beeps of binary. Rey loved Beebee-Ate. He was sweet, honest, and uncomplicated, like Blue. She wondered if Blue hated her for what she had almost done, or if he would forgive her the way he forgave Kylo for everything evil he had done. She wondered if Blue and Beebee would care that they were on opposite sides of a war. Could the droids see past the lines drawn in the sand, even if their masters couldn’t?

“He likes you,” a warm, friendly voice said behind her.

“Hey... Poe,” she said. He sat down next to her, smiling in his cocky, charismatic way. He was easy to talk to, but she supposed everyone thought of him that way; it was just who he was. There was a reason he was second-in-command. He was quick with a story, or a joke, or a game of sabacc to lift anyone’s spirits, but tonight was different. He was far more friendly than usual. Rey had been around enough lowlifes at Niima Outpost to recognize alcohol on someone’s breath. Poe Dameron was most definitely inebriated.

Celebration or sorrow? she wondered.

“I’m serious, Beebee-Ate likes you,” he admired. She knew how close he was to the astromech droid. For Poe to offer such kind words stirred a joy inside her that brightened her mood. He smiled at her again, and it earned him a genuine smile in return. His eyes were burning embers as he stared into hers. He had a way of making her feel special that made her feel anxious – a good anxious.

“I like him, too,” she said brightly, patting the droid fondly. “He’s the reason I left Jakku.” She was grateful to no longer be under the control of Plutt, but some days she wished she had run away on Takodana and never been found by Kylo. She would never have been involved in a war that had
nothing to do with her in the first place.

“Well, Beebee-Ate is very particular about the people he likes, so that says a lot about you.”

Rey scrunched her nose. The droid was the friendliest droid she had ever met, he loved everyone. “Is that so?” she asked the droid, who responded in more cheerful, affirmative beeps. Poe smiled warmly at their interaction. When his eye caught hers, a new emotion flashed across them. There was a hunger in his eyes that she had seen in men before.

It made her feel… wanted. Instead of further pondering the reason behind the thunderous beat of her heart in her chest, her mind unhelpfully supplied the strange conversation she had overheard earlier that day, and the lie Poe had told her about being alone in the room, but the fire in his eyes made her worries seem foolish and insignificant. The fine hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. Rey wanted to stand, to put space between them, but she convinced herself the strange feeling was due to the foreign nature of it all. She hadn’t grown up as they had; everything was new to her. She forced herself not to flinch when his hand rested on hers.

*Has he been sitting this close the whole time?*

His hand twitched as if he didn't know what to do with it now that he touched her skin. He seemed as nervous as she was, but that was silly; Poe was never nervous. “How are you?” he asked quietly.

_The truth? Kylo is my bondmate. I saw a vision of a future with him that I can't let go. He almost died. I saved him. I thought he would turn, but then I found out he had committed a massacre. I was angry, obviously, and I almost killed him. Now I can't stop thinking about it. About him. Did I fail by listening to the whispers? Or did I fail by not killing him? Either way, it would make me a terrible person, wouldn't it? So not great. But other than that..._*

“I’m fine.”

His eyes studied her as she was lost to her thoughts about someone she shouldn’t have been thinking of, not when there was someone there – someone who wanted to be there – to ease her loneliness. She wanted to belong; it shouldn’t matter with whom. Poe was a good guy. With resolution, she met his questioning stare. Poe's eyes were not haunted and conflicted as Kylo’s, but they were just as predatory. Her stomach tightened involuntarily, and she glanced away.

“No, I mean it,” he said seriously. “How are you? The rest of us have been jaded by the stress of
war, but you were just thrown into it. After everything that happened – and as the last remaining
Force user in this war – it must be difficult.” She couldn't help but find his comment silly. Of
course, she wasn't the last Force user; she was reminded of that every day. There was Leia, of
course, but she had all but forsaken the Force. And Luke wasn’t really gone. But even if there were
no more Jedi, there was still a very strong Force user who she was convinced could change the tide
of this war if he would just turn like she believed he would.

“Well, I’m not the last one,” she joked. He smiled, but his eyes didn’t.

“Well, I’m not the last one,” she joked. He smiled, but his eyes didn’t.

“Soon,” he whispered, “you will be.” If she was uncertain of her feelings about Kylo’s death
before, she couldn't ignore the way his comment sickened her. She would swear up and down that
she wanted him dead, but hearing it from someone else felt desperately wrong. There was no
denying the nausea that tightened in her throat.

Why?

A defiant tear fell down her cheek. He studied her quizzically, and fear shivered down her spine.
“I’m sorry; you’re right. I’m just so lonely. With no other Force users left, I feel like an outsider,”
she prevaricated, hoping it was a believable explanation for her tears. Though it wasn’t the reason
for her tears, it wasn’t a lie. Poe had already reacted strangely to her admission that Kylo hadn't
hurt her when he invaded her mind; she didn't need to provide him with more reasons to suspect her
dishonesty.

“You’re not an outsider,” he said gently, tightening his grip on her hand and wrapping his other
arm around her shoulder. His touch did not ignite a warmth within her, but it didn't terrify her,
either. Despite his inebriation, his kindness made her feel special for a moment, like she meant
more to people than her power. Perhaps he thought of her as more than a friend, or perhaps he was
just drunk. Offworlders had often tried to be “kind” to Rey after they had imbibed. But Poe had
made her feel special since the moment they first met.

If Poe continued to touch her, maybe she wouldn't pull away. Maybe she would let him show her
what shared loneliness was like. He wouldn't become attached, and neither would she. If he left
her, it would be okay. Maybe he was the perfect man for her – someone she could trust with
physical intimacy, but also someone she would never have to worry about falling for. Maybe it
would break the treasonous spell her enemy seemed to hold her under that wouldn’t allow her to let
him go. His eyes traveled over her, and she shivered, though not from the cool night air around
them.

In a moment of weakness, she decided to let him in. “Thank you, Poe, but some days, I just don’t
feel like I belong here.” It was a sentiment that had been true every day since she joined the
Resistance. She wondered if she would ever find her belonging there. She loved them dearly, but
she was not one of them.

“Where else would you belong?” he asked casually, though his eyes were more concentrated on lewdly roving over her body than her confession. If it were possible to remove clothes with his eyes, he would have done it. She felt breathtakingly out of her depth when it came to physical affection, but she wanted to be wanted, and she wanted to forget about him, if only for a moment.

“I don’t know,” she replied.

His arm wrapped around her tighter and he pulled her closer to him. “Look, when you were on world with Luke, Finn had the same concerns as you. But he found Rose, and, with her, a reason to fight. Maybe you need to find... your reason to fight.” His fingers slipped from her hand and slid under her chin. He lifted her face, and her eyes met his. She swallowed anxiously, her heart hammering in her throat. It was all so new and confusing. All the conflicting thoughts in her head weren’t helping.

*I want a reason not to fight. I want Ben to end all of this.*

Poe leaned closer, tightening the grip of his arm around her shoulder, so she couldn't move if she wanted to. Did she? He licked his lips, his breath, his eyes wild and dangerous. She closed her eyes. Panic tightened in her chest as she realized she felt none of the emotions she had expected to feel - that she had felt before in the hut, on Kamino, in that empty corridor, running her fingers through different dark, silky hair.

Poe was handsome, exceptionally skilled, and charming... in a roguish way. The best part was he wasn’t her sworn enemy. He was everything she *should* want. Yet she felt nothing she imagined she would feel, no matter how much sense it made. Poe was not the one she wanted, and the man she wanted, she couldn’t have. She could feel the heat from his lips as he drew closer. It wasn’t *his* lips she was imagining, however.

*Ben.*

Her eyes snapped open. “Poe...Poe...wait,” she whispered on his lips.

*I don’t want this. I don’t want him.*
It felt wrong. Rey could kiss Poe, but it would mean nothing. She wanted it to mean something. It was nice that he made her feel wanted, but she wanted to want him too. She wanted to feel a fraction of what Kylo made her feel. It was complicated and forbidden, but it was real. She prepared to voice the words aloud – the less treacherous ones, at least – but they died on her lips as she noticed the crackling in the Force.

*No...no...no... please... not now.*

Finn had seen Kylo during a connection; she had to assume Poe would too. What would he do? What could he do? Finn couldn’t hurt him, but the bond had grown stronger. Even if neither man could hurt the other, Kylo would undoubtedly be angry for what she had done; he could expose everything between them in spite. And Poe... he would never forgive her. If they could hurt each other, however, the outcome would be devastatingly worse. Kylo hadn’t tried to kill Finn, but he might try with Poe. And her bondmate was still wounded. Her mind immediately flashed to the blaster at Poe’s hip. Dread sank in her stomach.

*I have to do something! But what?*

**Kiss him...** the whisper echoed in the Force.

Poe was pulling away, heeding her reservations. She imagined what would happen if he turned around to discover the man appearing behind him. She grasped the front of his shirt. “Wait,” she said again. He smiled and his hand slid tenderly along her skin to cup her jaw.

“Let go,” he breathed, and she closed her eyes, perhaps if she concentrated intensely enough she could close the connection. His lips touched hers and she felt... nothing. The kiss was rough and passionless and did nothing to subdue the fear that spiraled through her. Poe must have felt the same, because he pulled away from her, confusion spreading across his face. She refused to break eye contact with Poe, lest he follow her gaze, but she didn’t need to look to know Kylo was there. The dark shape moving in the corner over Poe’s shoulder could have been none other than her bondmate.

Poe, meanwhile, was desperately searching her eyes. He must have found the unwillingness in her, because he withdrew the arm around her shoulder immediately.

“I’m sorry, Rey; I thought...” She didn’t sense hurt in his tempting brown eyes, but rather puzzlement, as if he couldn’t comprehend why she wouldn’t enjoy kissing him. The thought crossed her mind that he had never been denied before. She was relieved when he smiled reassuringly. She did not have the resolve for another confrontation.
“I’m sorry, it was a mistake...” she replied quickly. “Can you... I just need to be alone.” His brow furrowed, but he nodded once and stood. “Poe,” she said as he turned, forcing his eyes back to her. She froze, trying to think of something to say as he waited. “Thank you, for understanding.” She held eye contact with him, hoping he wouldn’t notice their enemy in the shadows, as he left in a huff of stumbling, drunk bewilderment. Rey followed him to the steps of the temple, watching him descend until he disappeared inside its belly. She sighed when he was gone. Rey was alone with her bondmate, and she had so much to tell him.

When she turned back toward him, she could sense an unbridled rage and misery that corrupted the Force around them. It was oppressive and nauseating. He was seated before some type of control panel, his eyes downcast as he busied himself flipping switches. As she stepped closer, she noticed his face was illuminated in a white glow. The room vibrated around him, and she suspected that he wasn’t in a room at all. Her fears were confirmed when he pulled sharply on a yoke in front of him. Kylo was in the cockpit of his fighter. He wasn’t wearing the cumbersome emergency atmospheric units or life-support mask used by most TIE fighters pilots. He wasn’t wearing any mask, for that matter. She noticed his eyes were glossy and his lips were quivering, and she doubted it was because of the danger he was facing.

Realistically, Rey knew he would still be angry with her for what she had done; she was still angry for what he had done. Part of her wanted to explain the contradiction between the voice inside and the voices in the Force, but could she trust his advice? Her thoughts were shaping into words on her tongue, but he spoke first.

“Poe Dameron? I wouldn’t take you for one of the women who would fawn over a man like him, but I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.” He had attempted to sound blithe and neutral to what he had witnessed, but the underlying resentment was evident. He had fallen back on the comfortable familiarity of derisive apathy, or at least feigned apathy. Rey immediate felt hot as the rage surged from his presumptuous words.

“You know nothing of him. Or me,” she snapped. She sat down on the steps, staring up at the heavens, willing him to leave. Why did she feel so guilty? She did what was necessary to protect him, to protect them both. They had to find a better way to conceal it. There was no end to the bond in sight, and they had to learn how to control it... together. She would have told him as much if he hadn’t reacted so cruelly. A distant explosion vibrated through the bond, and she determined quickly that he must be engaged in a dog fight.

“I think you’ve forgotten that I’ve searched both of your minds.” His voice was strained, but it was that tone again, from Starkiller. Haughty and superior. You know I can take whatever I want, the echo of a memory replayed in her mind.
“And I’d appreciate if you were never in my mind... ever... again,” she spat, turning to stare at him. He would not meet her eyes, intently concentrating instead on destroying whatever obstacle to victory that lay in his path.

“Why? Afraid of what I would find? Or afraid you can't force me out when you're too preoccupied with imagining his tongue down your throat?” he sneered. His brazen animosity astonished her. He had never spoken like that to her before. She sensed an equal measure of shock from his side of the connection. Another explosion rocked the bond, and she sensed his maniacal thrill at the destruction in his wake. His emotions raged around him; profound, mercurial and unhinged. This was the man she had seen on Crait. This was Kylo betrayed.

*That kiss meant more to him than it did to me.*

*Yes... now you see how you can truly hurt him... Tell him you enjoyed it... Lie... Crush him as he crushed you in the throne room... He will leave...* the voice whispered.

*Lie?*

Why would the Force guide her to lie?

“You have no right to dictate my life. Go back to your side of the galaxy!” After she spoke, she knew she should deescalate the situation, before he unraveled into something dangerous, because he was clearly on an unstable and unpredictable path of certain destruction. She should talk some sense into him, but every time he opened his infuriating mouth, he reignited the fire that burned in her chest. The darkness found her in her anger, shivering through her.

In recent weeks, as she sought the comfort and strength of darkness, his side of the connection had been surprisingly lacking, but not today. He was drawing in the darkness as if it was the very oxygen he breathed. “I’m so sorry I interrupted your intimate moment together... with this Force-forsaken bond that I have absolutely no control over,” he said distractedly, his words stinging with sarcasm. His hands were calm and sure on the controls, but his voice betrayed his intrepid exterior. Several alarms blared in his cockpit. He was going to get himself killed arguing about something that meant nothing.

“I know you know how to leave. Just go! Go back across the galaxy to your throne on your giant ship and your riches and expensive food and beautiful women and everything you could ever want. Leave me here to die alone with an empty kiss on this awful planet as we quickly run out of rations while you burn down the galaxy.” Both were quiet as her words settled in the void between them. Their waves of opposing anger that had been crashing steadily into the bond slowly relented. For a moment, all that remained was the raw edges of emotional wounds. Had they searched the bond, they could have found the reflection of their own vulnerable pain in their bondmate, but instead,
she grasped the familiar comfort of self-righteous indignation, and he grasped at the gratification of self-loathing misery.

“I can’t go anywhere; I’m in the Silencer, addressing a disturbance. Pirates. If you want me gone, do it yourself. You’ve done it before on Crait. While you’re at it, find a way to end this permanently.” He spoke as if he truly hated her. She studied his face. It was strange to be in his near vicinity and have his eyes focused anywhere but hers. His enigmatic stare haunted her even when they were apart. But at that moment, his attention was focused elsewhere...everywhere but on her.

Rey remembered his general telling him about a supply freight lost outside Taris. Pirates. At the time, he had instructed his general to assume it was lost. What had changed? The battle seemed complicated; his eyes steadily darted over a large field, and his gloved hands manipulated the controls in a practiced haste that suggested he was perpetually in danger. He pursed his lips as he executed a tricky maneuver, and Rey was reminded of her thoughts as Poe leaned in to kiss her. Her thoughts were of Kylo... and those expressive lips.

She was angry and disappointed beyond words with him. In her heart she had believed he was changing, then he had done something evil to prove she was wrong about him. Again. She knew she would never accept his terrible actions, she had no interest in pretending what he did was acceptable. Anyone else would have given up on him, but as deeply as she yearned to, his cruelty caused an ache in her chest that made it difficult to breathe. This was his darkness. Only then did she realize how different he had been with her. Had he given up on her/ Had he ever cared? Why couldn’t she be as apathetic to his fall as everyone else?

“You know I can’t control it like you can. Why do you do this? Why do you torture me with this bond? You ruin everything, you know that?” Her voice trembled as she tried desperately to suppress the dangerous emotions lurking just below the superficial anger she maintained as a safety net against emotional complication.

“Why do I torture you? No!” he shouted in rage. “You brought me here to torment me. You knew there would be no greater torture to me than seeing you... with him. He’s everything you want, and everything I can never be, I know that. The greatest pilot in your precious Resistance. The son my mother has always wanted. A more respected leader than I will ever be. And now, your...” lover. He refused to finish the sentence, but she heard it loud and clear in her mind. His jealousy dripped like venom from his words. He had no reason to be jealous; he didn’t want her, he only wanted to turn her. Maybe that was why he hated Poe, because it complicated his plans. She refused to look him in the eyes; she knew the misery she would find there. “This wasn’t me, Rey. You know it. Say it. Say it!”

“No! I won’t say it, because it’s not true!” She tried to find the part of her that resented him for Concordia, the part that would enjoy his suffering, but all she could find was the pain from his
cold indifference toward her. He acted wounded, as if she were the one to hurt him, but he had shown her how insignificant she was to him on the *Supremacy*. He had killed Snoke and his guard, only to turn his back on her as if she was... nothing. He was jealous of the things Poe had, but he had thrown them away for power. “You could have had all of that, but you made your choice in the throne room!” she cried defensively. “I hope it was worth it.”

“I didn’t make a choice,” he growled through his teeth, his words seeping with betrayal. “You did.”

“There was no decision to make! I would never join you! If I end up in his arms, it is because you drove me there!”

“So you lied. It was more than an empty kiss,” he said, his voice impossibly low, trembling with emotion. His energy withdrew from the bond as distantly as possible.

“What it was is none of your concern. Just end this. Before anyone else sees you. Please!”

He still refused to look at her as he recovered from a series of banking maneuvers. “Why does it matter if they see me, Rey? I can’t hurt them.”

“Because they don’t know, and I want to keep it that way! Why do you think I kissed Poe in the first place? He would have seen you! He could have...” *killed you.* She nearly sobbed, nearly allowing him to see how pathetically significant he still was to her. Darkness soothed the anger overwhelming her senses.

“Who in the Resistance knows about us – you and I?” It was astonishing how swiftly Kylo could vacillate between responses of anger, misery, contemplation, and derision. The fluctuation was as unpredictable as Kylo himself.

“There is no ‘you and I,’” she snapped. “Only Finn knows about the bond, because he saw you. And Chewie because he brought me to the *Supremacy*. And Luke, if that counts.”

His tone was pensive, and she sensed grief and regret in his spiraling emotions. “Chewie willingly brought you to me... to the *Supremacy? Why?”

*Because he believed in you, as I did. Even after the evil you’ve done. But we were wrong.*
Her voice was sharp and derisive. “Why don't you come home and ask him?”

“What about General Organa?” He asked casually as if she were not the woman who had given birth to him. “You haven’t told her?”

“Your mother?” She smiled mockingly as he worked his jaw in agitation. “No.”

“No?”

“I haven’t mentioned it.” She turned away, so he wouldn't see the insecurity in her eyes. He knew what Rey feared – if she told Leia, and she turned her back on her, then it was just more proof that she would never be good enough. “But we still talk,” she said defensively. “She has told me about you and her relationship with your father, and even told me the history of your grandfather and the Skywalkers. The true history. She has done everything to make me feel welcomed here. She is the strongest, wisest, kindest person I know; she is too good to me to burden her with knowledge of this awful bond. She doesn’t need more heartbreak in her life; she doesn’t need to know.” Rey didn't know why she had revealed that to him. He didn't deserve it. Perhaps he would even use it against them, but she wanted him to know what he had left behind. “She is the most selfless person I have ever met, and she doesn’t deserve any more heartache.”

“Of course, she is,” he said petulantly. “I'll have to take your word for it; I wouldn't know. That woman is a stranger to me.”

Rey narrowed her eyes in disgust. “Whose fault is that?”

“Ah, yes. You ‘know everything you need to know about me.’”

“Oh, for Force sake, she's your mother! She is a stranger because you left her!” She had told herself she wouldn't shout at him again; it drew too much attention. Yet her voice once again echoed across the valley. She had to give him credit – he knew exactly how to set her off.

“I suppose you're right; I am to blame, because I was not the son she wanted. But, make no mistake, that woman and I were strangers long before I burned down Luke's temple.” Rey didn't know what to say. What could she say? She would level accusations at him, and he would agree. It was infuriating...and confusing...and, in an odd way, heartbreaking, but she figured it was his intention to confuse her. Conversations were often one complicated holochess game to him.
“But I do know one thing. You are naïve if you believe Leia doesn’t know,” he snorted. “You can't hide anything from her, trust me. And, eventually, the rest of the Resistance will discover your secret as well. You understand the gravity of this bond, do you not? This is tantamount to treason. And if you’re caught, I cannot help you.”

“I don’t need you or your help.” She regretted the cruel tone to her words as she felt their effect in the bond, but she was too furious with him to stop. He deserved to suffer for the suffering he had caused.

“No, you don't.” he said through clenched teeth. “But you need to stop lying to everyone. Tell them the truth. Explain the Force Bond; it’s for your own protection. They won’t trust you if they discover it themselves. You’re already different than them, Rey. You don’t want to give them a reason to doubt you. They’ll try to kill you, too.”

*I’m sure you told the entire First Order about us, hypocrite.*

“I will never tell them, especially not Poe.”

“Why?” he asked with a slight tilt to his head. “Ashamed?”

“Why?” she shouted incredulously. “Because you’re the enemy, and our bond puts the entire Resistance at risk, that’s why!”

Another explosion shuddered through the bond. “Even if I left the First Order right now, you still wouldn’t tell them, would you? You don’t want your friends knowing you’re bonded to someone like me.”

*Hurt him... It is the only way he will close the bond before you’re discovered...* the whispers advised.

The voice was right. He was being cruel and unreasonable, he was making *her* feel guilty when she had done nothing wrong; he was risking *both* of their safety by refusing to close the bond, so she would make him pay. It was easy for the darkness to find her in her anger.
“I would never tell them, because you’re a monster!”

She knew how deeply that word affected him. He displayed no outward reaction other than his shoulders curling in slightly. His side of the bond was sealed tight so she couldn’t read his emotions, but she heard the heaviness in his voice when he rasped, “Yes…”

It wasn’t enough to make him shut her out, however. Rey wouldn’t yield due to one failure, despite the call inside her to stop. She was his bondmate, she knew how to hurt him. The images of Han Solo’s final moments burned through her mind. “And a murderer!”

His hand clenched on the controls. “Yes…”

“You are weak with lust for power!”

“I am weak with lust for much more unattainable things than power, sweetheart,” he retorted sarcastically. His eyes were alight with a feral ferocity, but he seemed just as surprised – and agitated – by the endearing term as she was.

_Sweetheart?

She had waited her entire life for her parents to return, to refer to her in that term of love and belonging that haunted her dreams. That word meant the galaxy to her. And he had single-handedly defiled it as if it meant nothing, as if she meant nothing. She refused to consider the implication of the rest of his words; she would not follow him down that dangerous path. Instead, she grasped onto the fury in the darkness.

“Did you just…. oh, you’re insufferable!”

“Am I?” he sighed flippantly. A bright orange light illuminated his face for a split-second, and his eyes looked more red-rimmed and glassy than she had observed in the darkness. “You’re one to talk.”

“Yes, _Supreme Leader... you are,_” she challenged. “You’re unpredictable. One day you hate me, the next you... don’t. You say whatever pops into your mind, awful things that hurt people, without considering the consequences.”
“Again. You're one to talk... sweetheart.” He didn’t bother to glance in her direction as he reached up to toggle switches above his head. “At least I’m not constantly wavering between killing or saving you.” His response only added kindling to the fire burning in her chest.

Look at him... He has the entire galaxy searching to kill you... It's only a joke to him... He is evil... Don’t let him forget that... the voice whispered.

“No, your highness, you are firmly set on killing me!” she argued furiously. “You issued a five million credit bounty on me! How could you send those people after me?”

His eyes met hers for a moment, and his contempt faded to something contemplative. He studied her as if he couldn't understand why she would be angry. “What did you expect me to do?”

Is he serious?

He's serious.

Is he insane?

“I don't know.” she snorted derisively. “How about... not put a bounty on my life? Was that too much to ask?”

“I didn’t issue a bounty for your life.”

“Liar! I saw it!”

Kylo hummed. “Well, you know everything, right?” There was something in his eyes that told her she didn’t, that he knew more than he chose to reveal. It was preposterous; if he had proof he wasn’t lying, why wouldn’t he tell her? She couldn’t search for the truth in the bond, because it was still fortified against her. And she couldn’t search for it in his eyes, because he refused to look at her.
“Even if I did… you left me little choice,” he said. “You didn’t sneak onto the Supremacy with the rest of the anarchists; you delivered yourself in front of an entire hangar of Sid… Snoke’s officers and troopers, forcing me to detain you. Then you left me, unconscious, as the only survivor in that room. I awoke to my general standing over me, prepared to kill me. Not that I’m not used to that, but if you wanted me dead, you could have at least had the decency to do it yourself. So I ask again, what did you expect? I did what I did to survive. It benefitted you as well; if he executed me for treason, your precious Resistance would have fallen.”

“‘It’s not like you helped us!’ she shouted, but his eyes were focused on his controls. She searched the surrounding steps for something to throw at him so he would meet her fiery gaze, so he would care. “You tried to kill us, including your own mother!”

He may not have spared her a glance, but she watched his eyes darken with fury. His voice was rough and dry, resentment twisting through every word when he finally spoke. “That may be true, but you both betrayed me. My mother never gave up on anyone, but I felt her give up on me. And you… you knew what Luke did to me, but you sent him to face me. He looked exactly as he did that night, but not his weapon, right Rey? I didn’t know my grandfather’s lightsaber was broken, but you did. You sent him out there projecting the lightsaber you had just tried to use against me, after I saved you and asked you to join me. You wouldn’t even face me after what you had done. When my blade passed through him, I have never felt so relieved in my life. But the plan worked. I failed; he distracted me from my mission to destroy the Resistance. Hux would have pushed through. He would have destroyed you all.”

“What do you want? Sympathy for not killing me and your mother?” her tone was sarcastic and juvenile, but it was his fault for drawing it of her. Again. “You poor, innocent thing, you had no choice at all. You were coerced into becoming the most powerful man in the galaxy and forced to massacre thousands of people with your bare hands. It’s not like you chose power instead of me.”

“I begged you to join me,” he reminded her sharply, his voice wavering with a rage that would have been terrifying if they were not across the galaxy. The bond was like hot embers, sparking with betrayal.

“Why would I? You're evil!” The darkness did little to consume the rage that vibrated in her voice. She allowed more darkness inside in the hope that it would numb her to the pain of what he had done and continued to do. “You use the Force to commit indefensible horrors! You will never find forgiveness for the suffering you have caused.”

His face hardened. “Have I ever said otherwise?”

“Why would you? It’s clear you care about no one but yourself.”
“And I am the last person in the galaxy you would ever want to be bonded with. Your enemy. Trust me, you have made it abundantly clear.” Blinking rapidly, he chewed his lips as he swallowed the remainder of his comment. His shoulders slumped as his broad frame hunched in an almost protective posture. The barriers around his mind were similarly protective; they were unyielding and impenetrable as stone when she tried to sense his emotions. It was almost as if he was shielding himself from her words, as if what she said actually meant anything to him. Which it clearly didn't. She meant nothing to him, and neither did her words. But the man before her was everything that Kylo Ren was not. There was a voice inside her, piercing through the darkness, begging her to stop, but she refused to listen.

She hoped her words would return the fire to his eyes. “Well, do you blame me?”

“No, not at all. It just took you longer than I expected to give up on me, too.” The bond was changing, fraying, withering. It was sobering in the darkness, but not quite enough. Another explosion reverberated around him.

“It took you longer than expected to show me who you truly are,” she replied. When he was gone, it was easier to think clearly. His presence brought too many emotions to the surface that she tried desperately to repress. It was difficult enough fighting against him, but she had to fight her naïve hope as well.

“No, I've only ever been honest with you.”

“You’re a liar!” She shouted, hiccuping a sob, not caring who heard her anymore. The tears welled in her eyes, but she would not let him see them. Not again. She would not let him see the deep wounds she still carried with her.

Another explosion reflected on his hardened features. “Am I, Rey? Or do you just prefer to live in ignorance like you've done your entire life?”

No, it was all a lie that you naively believed... He manipulated you because he wanted the map to Luke to please his master... He killed Snoke in anger for creating the bond and then blamed it on you... He never cared about you... It was all a lie... He is a monster... He means nothing to you... If he was dead, you would be free... the whisper reminded her.

“Liar! You made me believe in those Force bonds on Ahch-To and Kamino that you cared about me! You made me believe in that vision! But it was all a lie!”
“Not for me!” he growled in an escalating rage she could feel burn through the bond. “I believed in it, too.”

No. you chose the power. You tried to kill us all. You told the First Order lies about me. You killed women and children for them. You’re not the victim here.

“It doesn’t matter what you say, I don’t believe you. Your words mean nothing to me. You mean nothing to me,” she said, her voice trembling. He flinched. Rey would have walked away in that moment if she could. She didn’t want to fight anymore, but the darkness that soothed her heartache also dragged the words from her throat. “I could never love someone like you.”

“I never asked you to love me!” he shouted. There was an aching vulnerability to his tone that belied his volatility. Still, she was thankful he was confined to his cockpit. “I never asked for this Force-forsaken bond! I never asked for any of this! I am master of the Knights of Ren, Supreme Leader of the First Order. Skywalker is dead, Leia’s Resistance is dwindling, the galaxy is within my grasp. I have everything I’ve ever wanted! But it’s not…” He paused, lowering his voice to a snarl. “You say I have ruined everything, but no, Rey, it is you who has ruined everything. You have ruined me!” She shuddered as he cried out into the cockpit, slamming his fist into the frame.

“I never asked for this, either,” she whispered, grasping for the darkness that would ease the despair. The raw wound was ripped open like a scab every moment he was near, but the cruel words, anger, darkness... none of it would soothe the pain.

“What do you want from me, Rey?”

“Nothing.”

“No. What do you want from me?” he demanded. “We have this bond – you know I won’t turn, I know you won’t join me, and we can’t break it. One day you beg for my life and touch me in ways not meant for an enemy. The next you try to kill me and kiss drunk pilots to torture me. What do you want? To manipulate me? Seduce me to the light? Save me? Destroy me? Fight me like this until one of us dies? Do you even know? Or is this a game? Where does this end, Rey? What is your hope here?”

Yes, one of you must die... It is your destiny to destroy him... You hate him... You hope he will die and bring you peace... That is the truth... With the whispers came the comforting tendrils of darkness.
“I hope your fighter explodes with you in it, that’s what I hope, Supreme Leader,” she snapped. He didn’t move, but his side of the bond recoiled from her words.

*If you want me dead, at least have the decency to do it yourself,* his voice echoed through the bond.

He grimaced as another alarm sounded in his cockpit. Refusing to look up at her, he asked his droid for a read-out as he continued to flip switches at the controls. He looked completely unfazed by her words, his attention devoted entirely to a different fight, a more important fight. She wondered why the Supreme Leader was drawn into an inconsequential battle like recovering a stolen freighter from pirates. He had the entire First Order at his disposal. It seemed likely that he could find enough trained pilots to fight while he watched from the safety of his throne.

*But then again, he enjoys murder. What else would do with his time?*

“I hate you,” the darkness twisted through her, delivering her words calmly and coldly from her lips.

“I know,” he whispered. His eyes finally connected with hers. She inhaled sharply as the anger fell away at the look in his eyes. The darkness faded with the anger, lifting the fog in her mind. There was no anger or resentment blazing in his eyes. Only a pain that ached in her own soul. He glanced away, swallowing his misery as he focused on his mission. Guilt tightened in her throat as she looked down at her hands.

Why did she say those things? He justified his own cruel words, but that wasn’t who she was. She was so angry, and hurt, and confused, and the whispers of the Force made sense. But this seemed wrong. This felt like walking against the sands in a windstorm. The darkness was soothing, the darkness eased her pain, but it ignored the calls inside her. Even if she hated him, which deep inside she knew she didn’t, when had she become the person who would intentionally try to hurt someone like that? Why did their bond have to be so complicated?

A new alarm blared in his cockpit. It caught her attention because she noticed the soft cinch of his breath and the slight tremble of his gloved fingers. He was all at once scrambling at the controls. His entire demeanor had changed, his panic feeding hers, breaking through the remaining layers of darkness as if it were nothing. Their fight suddenly lost all significance. She could feel it in the Force, something was terribly wrong.
He ignored her, which she supposed she deserved. “General,” he said calmly into his comlink. His voice may have betrayed nothing of his current emotional state, but she could see the fear in his eyes. “There has been a malfunction in the Silencer. My deflector shield generator is down.” Rey may have never flown a TIE, but she had been around enough ships to know what a deflector shield generator was as well as the implications of losing the deflector shield.

“No, Hux. I’m staring at it now,” he argued into his comlink. “It’s offline. No, no, no, this can’t... now all weapons systems are offline as well. All defensive systems are down. I'm...”

“Ben?” Rey said shakily, stepping toward him. The whispers were gone, and the conflicting emotions, leaving only fear. For him.

“I know it’s impossible!” he shouted at the other man. The words she had said to him replayed in her mind as she stepped closer. She wanted to apologize, tell him she didn’t hate him or want him dead – that she had been confused in the darkness. But she never had the chance.

Kylo’s head snapped to something that had caught his attention to the right. He cried out in surprise as his hands came up to protect himself. Rey felt an intense wave of Force crash through their bond, followed by a deafening explosion that jolted her senses. The vibrations shuddered through her bones, the heat prickled her skin. A bright orange fireball flashed across the cockpit as she reached him, and the bond snapped shut before her fingertips. The sounds of the rainforest returned to the cool night around her, but it was achingly quiet. She shivered. Everything was still, but the bond was hollow.

“Ben?”
Chapter End Notes

Jealousy

There is a kiss, though it is not out of affection. It is not between Kylo and Rey. Kylo is jealous and reacts poorly.

Threat of violence
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Rose walked next to Finn as they made their way through the winding corridors to escape the confines of the temple. They were nearly to the steps when they encountered Poe, who was
staggering from Leia’s room, grumbling, “I know that’s not what you meant, Leia.” Rose noticed the agitated expression on Poe’s face as Finn did.

“Are you okay?” Finn asked, grabbing their commander by the arm.

“Yes...” he sighed, “Actually no... you need to talk to Rey. I don’t know what happened. I was talking to Rey, and I thought maybe she wanted… more. She gave off all the signs, then told me to stop, fine, but then she kissed me, even though it seemed forced, and then she told me to leave like I was the one who kissed her! I don’t know what’s going on with her, but there was a lot more going on than her changing her mind. She never wanted to kiss me, but I don’t know why she did or why she wanted me to leave so badly. If you don’t confront her, I will.” He ripped his arm away and stormed back into the temple. Rose eyed Finn curiously, and they made their way up the steps.

Neither were Force-sensitive, but even they could sense a disturbance around them. The air felt heavier and unusually cold for the temperate rainforest planet. The fine hair on their arms stood on end, and they could feel an electric tingling across their skin. Though both had always assumed only Jedi and Sith felt the Force, there was no mistaking both the physiological and emotional upheaval taking place around them. It quickly became apparent why.

Rey was hysterical. She was on her knees, her hands over her eyes as she screamed. The sound was buffered by...something; a whirlwind of something strong, powerful and alive. The thrashing winds – of what they could only assume was the Force – spiraled around her, carrying her voice as well as any object in its path. The magnetism and polarity of it made them instantly nauseous. Both had been lighthearted when climbing the steps, but remorse and sorrow settled over their senses. Rose wondered if Rey was projecting her own emotions somehow. Finn wondered why anyone would want to be exposed to the Force on a regular basis.

“Rey!” Finn shouted and stepped forward into the whirlwind.

Rey’s eyes snapped open as she sensed her friends. She panicked. Losing control over her emotions was problematic enough, the last thing she wanted was to endanger her friend’s lives. They couldn’t help her, no one could. She had feared her presence at the base because of her connection to their enemy, but she had never considered if her powers would just as dangerous.

“Leave!” she screamed, but the spike of fear was all it took for the emotions to reach a breaking point. As she braced against them, they exploded out into the Force. Finn and Rose were surprised by the blast that was strong enough to send them sprawling onto their backs.

Rey jumped to her feet. “I’m so sorry!” she cried, reaching for them. She took a step closer, but
thought better of it and backed away slowly. “You shouldn’t be here.” Her friends cautiously stood, and she awaited their wrath. Their abandonment. Their eyes flickered with fear, but they did not run as she had anticipated.

“Rey, what was that?” Finn gasped.

“I don’t know,” she replied. She clenched her fists to control the shaking in her hands. “That has never happened to me before.”

Rose’s voice was more soothing in tone than Finn’s, but just as concerned. “What is going on?”

“Nothing,” Rey said as she wiped her tears. She knew she had said it too quickly, too *vehemently*, for it to have been nothing. They wouldn’t have believed her anyway, after that display. As the agitation faded from her overwhelming emotions, Rey was left feeling… nothing. It was as if all her emotions had left her body, and all that was left was an empty shell. Maybe it was. Maybe they would never come back.

She wouldn’t raise her eyes to meet Finn’s, even when he grasped her shoulders. She couldn’t stand to see the fear and disappointment in his eyes. “Nothing? You’re crying! And creating emotional Force storms. That’s not nothing. And we ran into Poe, he’s blabbering about you kissing him? What is going on?”

*I can’t feel him. He’s gone. But he can’t be gone. I didn’t feel it in the Force. Does that happen for darksiders? Did I feel Snoke’s death? I don’t remember.*

“Finn, can you start the walk without me?” Rose asked him. Rey finally glanced up at that. The fear and disappointment she expected were nonexistent in their eyes. Finn’s face only showed concern. Rose smiled knowingly. The woman nodded at Finn, eyebrows raised in insinuation, and he seemed to catch on rather quickly.

He nodded reluctantly. “I’ll be waiting at the bottom if you need me.”

Rey knew he was reluctant to leave her after what had happened, but he acknowledged that conversation was one of the two women would need to have alone. Before he began his descent down the steps, he pivoted back to embrace her. “I’m always here for you if you need me,” he said softly. He sighed, nodded again at Rose, and slowly disappeared into the darkness of the night.
Rose turned toward her friend, both concern and understanding reflecting on her features. Rey let the heaviness in her legs bring her to her knees. Rey didn’t realize Rose had stepped closer until she knelt next to her. “Did he hurt you, Rey?”

Rey could barely hear her friend over her inner screaming. “What?”

Where are you, Ben? Why can’t I feel anything from you?

“Poe... did he do something...”

“What? No,” Rey said distantly, “This isn’t about him at all.” She wondered if her words sounded as hollow and emotionless as they did in her head.

“But you kissed him?”

This isn’t about some silly kiss that meant nothing!

“Not really, and this isn’t about that,” she replied. She knew she sounded distracted, but she was. Searching their bond, she hoped to feel the tumultuous emotions or physical pain that one would expect from someone who survived that blast. She felt nothing. Rey wished for once that she didn’t have extensive knowledge of ships from her scavenging days. Though she had never worked on the type of ship Kylo had piloted, she had disassembled TIE fighters. The shield generator or defense systems had been compromised, Kylo’s ship would have been exposed and vulnerable to attack. Without the life-support mask, what chance would he have had once the cockpit was breached by the explosion? Her mechanic brain told her it wasn’t survivable, but her hopeful heart couldn’t accept that.

Ben?

Confusion replaced the concern on Rose’s face. “You kissed him, but... not really?”

“Kissed who?”

Please answer Ben, just tell me you’re okay.
“Poe,” Rose huffed. “You said ‘not really’ when I asked you if you kissed him.”

Rey interrupted her unpracticed search of the Force to focus on her friend. “I didn’t mean to, is all. It meant nothing.”

*Why don’t you understand that I don’t care about the kiss!*

Rey felt the emotions returning full force like opening the floodgates. The first emotion she felt was frustration at answering useless questions about Poe Dameron. With the anger and frustration came the despair, however. She could feel them building in the Force again.

Rose, however, was still focused on trivial matters. “You didn’t mean to kiss him...”

“No, I was trying to protect Ben!”

Rey gasped. She hadn’t meant to say it. She hadn’t meant to tell Rose anything. If Rose knew about him, she’d know about the bond; if she knew about the bond, she would tell the others, and they would all find out that she had gone to him on the *Supremacy*, failed, kept it secret from them, and kept secrets for him, including the key to ending the war. Rey panicked.

“Wait...” Rose’s eyes narrowed as she studied her face. “Who is Ben?”

Rey dropped her face to her hands as she battled to suppress her emotions. “Rose, please promise me you’ll never tell anyone I said that.”

*Ben, I don’t know what to do. Please. Please, be okay.*

“Rey, you need to tell me what’s going on here, because it is obviously not ‘nothing,’” Rose had the leverage to force her confession, and Rey couldn’t think of an adequate excuse for her slip up. It would have to be the truth. They could imprison her or force to leave for what she had done. She would deserve it. But she had to admit the truth.
At least, *part* of the truth.

“Remember the guy I told you about?” she said, biting back tears. “He appears to me through the Force?”

Rose’s expression softened. “The one who broke your heart?”

“That’s the one,” Rey answered. She exhaled slowly as she steeled herself for the reaction. “Well, Poe was here when Ben appeared. And Poe heard him, and I panicked so I kissed Poe so that he wouldn’t discover Ben and...”

“And now this ‘Ben’ is upset with you over the kiss?” Rose guessed. Rey was going to correct her. She wanted to scream, *no, he could be dead because I told him I hated him and hoped he would die, because I... because I don’t know who I am anymore!* But she decided, at that moment, Rose’s version was easier to explain, and it wasn’t entirely false.

She sniffled, drying her eyes. “Yes.”

“Did you explain what happened?”

“No! He never gave me the chance,” Rey shouted in anger, and she knew she wasn’t angry at her friend. She was angry at the Force for connecting them, at him for being so difficult, and at herself for how she had reacted. Rose, for her part, took it in stride.

“He left?”

“No, not right away,” she said, swiping at her eyes again. “He was cruel, and I was still so angry with him, so I said horrible things that I didn’t mean. It doesn’t even feel like me when I’m saying them. The Force guides my thoughts, and the words I say feel right when I say them, but after... I know this isn’t me. I don’t *want* it to be me. But it doesn’t matter, because then he was gone and now I’m terrified I will never see him again.”

*Ben, please! Answer me.*
“Can you trust the Force’s guidance?” It was a simple question, but it was one Rey had never contemplated before. What could she trust, if not the Force? When she answered her friend, however, it did not sound as certain as it had in her head.

“Of course!”

Rose nodded, smiling in reassurance, but she continued to press. “I just thought, with the Force storm that seemed to be hurting you, that perhaps –”

“No, it didn’t do that to me, that was my own inability to control my emotions in the Force.”

Ben!

“If you can trust the Force – and it actually is the Force – then either you misunderstood its guidance, or he deserved what you said to him.” Rose shrugged. It made perfect sense. But there was something about what she said that felt terrifyingly correct, something that voice inside desperately called for her to see.

“I don’t know, Rose,” she whispered. “I just know something inside me is screaming that all of this is wrong.”

Rose sat down on the top step of the temple and beckoned for Rey to join her. “Can you find him? In the Force?” she offered. “I’m sorry, I don’t know how this works.”

Rey shook her head, slumping down next to her friend. “No, he’s gone.”

“Well, he’s real, right? Could you go to him?” Rose asked, before adding, “After Maz creates a distraction for the First Order, of course.”

“I don’t know if I should.” Rey stared out into the darkness of the Barkhesh night. Somewhere above them in the vast blanket of stars was Kylo. Her mind helpfully supplied different scenarios of what he was enduring while they were apart. He could be dead, floating in space amongst the twisted remains of his fighter. He could be alive but mortally wounded; slowly dying after he crash-landed on Taris, and there would be nothing she could do to save him. He could have saved himself, as his mother had, and could be unconscious in a medbay. It could have all been a mistake, and he could be standing at the viewport of the Finalizer, contemplating the same stars,
waiting for her to come find him. That was how she had imagined him when she left Ahch-To to cross the galaxy for him, and that was how she wanted to imagine him now. “The last time I went to him, I wanted him to come back with me, but he didn’t.”

“Then let him go.”

Rey could feel the swell of sorrow again and tried to blink back the emotions. She had cried enough tears over him. “I don’t want to let him go, I just want him to be the man I know he can be. I can’t stop thinking about him. I want to hate him, Rose, I tried. But I can’t.”

“Okay, I know we don’t know each other that well yet, but can I say something?” Rey met her friend’s eyes and nodded. “It sounds to me like you love him, but you don’t want to love him.”

There was a strange mix of emotions that fluttered to life inside her, but she shut them away to dissect later… or never. “No, I can’t love him!” Rey was vehement in her denial of both the capability and practicality of such an outrageous claim. “I have never loved anyone like that, and I won’t start now, not with him.”

*Especially not with him.*

“You can love anybody,” her friend reminded her as she picked the dirt from underneath in fingernails. “Forbidden or complicated love is still love. I’m just saying, it’s difficult to be heartbroken if you don’t love someone.”

Rey wondered if she would feel the same if she knew it was their enemy. “You don’t understand, I can’t.”

“Okay,” Rose shrugged as if she hadn’t nearly destabilized Rey’s entire existence with one question. “But does he love you?”

“I told you, he wouldn’t come with me.”

“Just because he wasn’t ready yet, doesn’t mean he doesn’t love you,” Rose said, and Rey wished it was that simple. It wasn’t that he wasn’t ready to turn, it was that he didn’t want to. And he didn’t love her, he hated her, he had tried to kill her on Crait. “I could be wrong; I don’t know the guy, but I know you. Who wouldn’t love you?” Rey wanted to explain how her parents had
abandoned her, how no one had ever loved her until Finn, and that was only because she was his first friend. The more involved he became with the Resistance, the less she would matter to him. That’s how it would always be. People abandoned her. Kylo promised her she was not alone, but where was he? “And if he doesn’t love you, why was he so upset you kissed Poe?”

Rey didn’t have an answer for that, but she refused to consider it when their bond was still dark. If he died while hating her, then that was something she could weather. If he died and he cared about her at all, even as a friend, she didn’t know how her heart would survive it. “It doesn’t matter. He’s gone, maybe forever.”

“Nothing is forever,” Rose said, tilting her head for a better view of the stars. “Maybe time apart could be good for you. I think what you want to feel and what you truly feel are two different things. And maybe this time, when you go to him, it’ll be different. Love is a powerful motivator.”

Love. Her heart was conflicted enough. It was impossible to explain to Rose how at odds she was with herself without that complicated and terrifying emotion. How could she rationalize any of it? It should have been easy. Kylo was their enemy; he should have been treated as such. Something inside her wouldn’t allow it, however. She didn’t want to forgive him, not after what he had done to break her heart. She wanted to hate him, to protect herself from further pain, but she couldn’t. She wanted guidance in the Force, but she didn’t know which whisper to trust. She wanted to feel at home with the Resistance, but she didn’t. She should want him dead, should celebrate the thought that her trouble with the bond was over, but no amount of convincing could make her accept his death as a good thing.

Rey was beginning to believe the hope inside her was a curse. What had it ever gotten her besides misery? She refused to even believe he was dead. If Kylo Ren was meant to die, it wouldn’t be inconsequential like that. It was the only hope she could hold onto. As the light drifted back into her heart with that thought, she felt a moment of calming warmth. That warmth shattered, however, with her friend’s next words. “Rey, why does the name ‘Ben’ sound so familiar?”

This was it. This was the moment she feared. This was when the truth would tear down everything she had fought to protect. “I… he’s… who?” she stammered.

“The whisper!” Rose realized. “That was the name Leia whispered in her sleep!”

Rey closed her eyes, accepting that lying at this point was futile. “Yes.”

“Who is he?”
“Ben Solo, her son.” Rey braced herself, awaiting the anger, fear, disgust, disappointment... but it never came.

Her heart soared at her friend’s next question. “Leia has a son?”

She doesn’t know any of it, she understood in relief. She has no idea that Leia has a son, which means she has no idea that Ben Solo is Kylo Ren.

“Yes, but they had a ... falling out,” Rey equivocated. “She has no idea that this is going on. Please, promise me you won’t tell anyone.”

“I promise, Rey. It’s not my place to get involved,” she assured her. “But let me get this straight: You have a relationship with General Leia’s son, and you think she doesn’t know about it? She seems like the kind of mother who knows exactly where her son is and what he’s doing.”

Yeah, that’s what he said, too, but if she knew where he was and what he was doing, then she would know about the bond, because she’s... She shivered with realization. Leia’s Force-sensitive! If something happened to him, then she would feel it! She would know! She would tell me!

“Rose, you’re so right!” She embraced the startled woman. “I have to go see Leia!” She jumped to her feet and sprinted down the steps into the temple without looking back at her incredulous friend.
Chapter End Notes

Mild violence

Rey knocks her friends down with the Force.
One Question

Chapter Notes

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Rey sprinted down the corridor toward Leia’s room. If something had happened to him, Leia would know. Though they had been strangers for years, Leia could feel her son in the Force. She would have felt it if something changed, she would have told someone. There would be alarms sounding, Resistance members running through the halls, coordinating whatever people coordinate when they know the Supreme Leader is…

Dead.

Rey refused to believe he was gone. As long as she had hope, she would continue to believe it. It strengthened the closer her feet brought her to his mother. There were no cries of sorrow, not even hushed whispers of half-hearted condolences. It was silent. Disturbingly silent. No, peacefully silent. Rey tried to shut his angry, needy, betrayed eyes from her thoughts. She tried to drown out the miserable words by focusing on the roar of her blood through her veins. Everything will be okay.

She rounded the corner to Leia’s room, nearly colliding with Threepio. “Miss Rey, General Leia has been expecting you.”

With those eight words, Rey’s hope was shaken. Dread pooled in her stomach. The adrenaline rush of hope that carried her to the general dissipated quickly. Had she been expecting her because she had bad news to break to her? Had she felt what happened to Ben? The protocol droid accompanied her to the room entrance, announcing her. If Leia spoke, Rey didn’t hear a word of it. She was too focused on remaining standing as her knees shook violently.

Her voice didn’t fare much better. Each word was quivering with anticipation. “You’ve been expecting me?”

There were dark circles under Leia’s eyes, and her skin was sickeningly pale, yet the Force was stronger around her than Rey had ever felt before. There were no tears staining the woman’s cheeks, but Rey wasn’t certain that was enough to reinforce her hope. The Resistance would kill him if they were given the chance. Would she cry for her son after the evil he’d done? Or would she sigh in relief that it was finally over? When Leia spoke, her voice was soft but strained. “Is everything… okay with you, Rey?”

“Me?” she asked quietly, trying to acquaint herself with the notion that these people actually cared how she felt. It was easier to answer with a dismissive “fine,” but she wasn’t okay, and she wouldn’t be until Leia gave her the information she needed. Her stare dropped to her feet.
“Well...no.”

“Now, I know you can take care of yourself and it’s none of my business,” Leia said in her no-nonsense, yet motherly way. “However, as another Force-sensitive woman, I can’t help but feel protective of you here. Is there something you want to talk about? Just between us?” Rey realized with an exasperated sigh that Leia wasn’t talking about her son at all. It should have made her hopeful, but Rey wasn’t certain that Leia even felt him anymore. Rumor had spread quickly through the Resistance.

“Poe talked to you.”

“Well, yes...”

“Leia, I’m so sorry.” Her eyes remained downcast as her cheeks and ears flushed. The woman was trying to lead a rebellion, and she had to resolve a stupid misunderstanding. “You shouldn’t be worrying about silly things like that. It was a mistake, and it won’t happen again. You have my word.”

Leia cleared her throat. She could feel the heat of her stare. Rey slowly dragged her eyes to the woman’s face. Perhaps the general had called Rey to her room under the pretense of investigating the kiss, but there was a deeper concern in her eyes. Rey felt a renewed panic tighten in her throat as she awaited the fateful words. Leia only extended her suffering longer. “Is there anything else you want to talk about?”

Of course, there was one question Rey had been desperate to ask only seconds before. But when Leia asked her, Rey wasn’t certain she wanted to know the answer anymore. If it would change everything, what was the harm in waiting one more moment? Perhaps Leia would just tell her and take the choice from her. “Is there something you want me to talk about?”

“No, not at all,” Leia smiled, and Rey tried her best to return the gesture through the anxiety tightening in her chest. “If you have any questions about the Force, I’m no Luke, but I can help you the best way I can. I know that it can get lonely when you are different, even if your difference is a gift. Anytime you need to talk, no matter what, I’m here. No questions asked, no judgment.”

“I have one question,” she said, speaking before her mind could convince her otherwise. It was with such haste that her words tumbled together. “Can you feel Ben in the Force?”
Judging by the confusion that flashed across her expression, it was a question that the general had not been expecting. If he was gone, the woman had no idea. That restored some hope to her aching heart. The general studied her quietly. Only this wasn’t the decorous gaze of a rebellion hero, it was the gaze of a mother. “Of course,” Leia replied with measured restraint, her curiosity toward the probing question evident in her heartbroken eyes. “I can’t pinpoint his location or speak to him in the Force – it is not as strong as my connection with Luke is…was – but he’s still my son.”

“Can you feel him right now?” Rey blurted out impulsively. She tried to mask the panic and hope in her voice. If she could feel him, then he was alive. If he was alive, then there was still hope she could bring him back to his mother.

“Not like I can when he’s close. Don’t worry, he’s somewhere across the galaxy.” Leia’s tone was reassuring, but her eyes glazed with sorrow. Rey’s stomach twisted as she realized what Leia was saying. She was a mother grieving for the lost son she might one day be forced to approve orders to kill, and she was reassuring Rey. It was evident that Leia believed she was only asking about him because she was afraid he would find her again. If only Rey could explain she was afraid he wouldn’t find her.

She wrung her fingers anxiously to control their shaking. “But you would know if something... terrible had happened to him?”

Leia’s eyes darkened, her lips pulled into a firm line. “As in death?”

Rey nodded.

The ailing woman sighed something broken and agonized, and the strong projection she maintained dropped long enough for Rey to witness long-suffering pain underneath. Rey wished her bondmate had been there, to prove he was alive, but also to witness the torment his mother endured at imagining his death. “Yes, I’ll know the moment he’s gone, just as we did with Luke. Even after everything he has done, and what I know we must do to save the galaxy, I fear it every day.”

Rey gasped, her energy brightened in hope. Relief bubbled up in her throat and spilled over into her words. “So he’s alive? You can feel him right now?”

There was something different that crossed Leia’s features, something cautious and guarded, but hopeful. “Yes...”
“He’s okay,” she breathed, wiping the tears that had swelled in her eyes. “He’s okay. Thank you, Leia. Thank you so much.” She threw her arms around the woman and nearly knocked her over with the strength of it. Rey released her, apologizing, as she remembered herself. “I’m sorry. I’m just... thank you.” She stood, prepared to excuse herself before she embarrassed herself further. Kylo was alive, there was still hope. As the dread faded, her mind reeled with questions. Why couldn’t she feel him? Was he hurt? Was their bond broken? Did he break it?

As she brushed off her grey pants and turned toward the makeshift door, Leia’s voice behind her recaptured her attention. “Rey?” Leia’s voice trembled. She sounded like she was on the verge of tears. Rey spun on her heels to face her general and her pooling eyes. “I know I said no questions asked, but I don’t remember the last time anyone sounded relieved to hear that my son is alive. Is there anything you want to tell me, Rey?”

If I told you the truth, what would you do?

“General,” a voice interrupted them, “I need to speak with you.” Lieutenant Connix walked into the temple room, and Rey stepped backward toward the door.

“Rey?” Leia repeated, more cautious this time.

“I have to go,” Rey said, backing from the room. Before Leia could call her again and make her witness the hope in her eyes again, Rey sprinted down the corridor to the safety of her room. Leia watched her flee and wondered what her idiot son and that impulsive girl had gotten themselves into. Something had happened on Snoke’s flagship. It had seemed like Rey was only angry and disappointed in him at first, but there was more there now. That intuition inside her guided her to wait. As long as it didn’t endanger the Resistance, she would be patient and allow it to play out to the will of the Force. There was no denying, however, that something significant was looming just beyond the darkness on the horizon.

“General?”

Leia directed her attention to the other woman. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

Connix bit her lip anxiously. “We’ve contacted every last one of the sympathizers to the Rebellion from the list you gave us, and they’re not coming. They all don’t want to get involved, but they want me to pass along that they ‘have hope your rebellion will save the galaxy.’”
Leia sighed.

“That has always been the problem, Connix,” she said. “Everyone wants to be saved, but most are too afraid to do what’s necessary to save themselves.”

“Afraid of what? The First Order will kill us all!”

“They’re afraid for their lives, of course,” Leia replied with a low chuckle. “But they’re also afraid of breaking the status quo, of risking something worse in its place, of being the only voice in a silent crowd. They’ll take up the fight when death is on their doorstep, but by then, it’s usually too late.”

The Lieutenant turned away to hide her sorrow. “Then what do we do now?”

“We do it ourselves, as we’ve always done, and seek help in some unlikely places. It seems our friends are now limited to the enemies of our enemy.” As Connix nodded in discouragement, Leia grasped the young woman’s hand, forcing her to meet her gaze. “It is far from over, dear. Have hope.”
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Rose found Finn right where he told her he would be. He was wringing his hands and pacing. She knew his thoughts were on Rey, but she couldn’t help admiring how handsome he looked in the moonlight. He was conventionally attractive – a smile that lit up the room, perfect hair she yearned to touch, and a strong body that would make any woman swoon. Her treacherous mind had even found him dashing in a First Order uniform, not that she would ever tell him that.

His gentle eyes reflected the stars, and even if his thoughts were elsewhere, she felt like the only woman in the galaxy when he stared up at her. He licked his lips in anticipation of the details she would provide him, but she could only think about how much she desired to kiss those soft lips again. She had thought she was dying, she thought she would never have another chance to show him how wrong she had been about him. She had hoped that the concern in his eyes had meant that he had felt something, too. But she had woken up alone, and though she had been told that Finn had visited her, it was likely more out of guilt than anything else.

Since she had awoken, Finn had been keeping his distance. When they were reunited, it was clear that her feelings were very one-sided. She envied the problem Rey had. The Jedi clearly loved Leia’s estranged son. And judging by his reaction to Rey’s kiss with their commander, he loved her too. Force-users always seemed more in tune with their emotions, and while she didn’t want Rey to suffer, it was helpful to know that even those who were one with the Force didn’t have all the answers with love.

Rey was… a little rough around the edges because of her upbringing; she was secretive, solitary, and always lost to her thoughts. Rose had wondered if there was more behind the last Jedi’s distant stare; maybe it was this “Ben”-- maybe her heart was calling for someone across the stars. Rey had some soul-searching to do. She was so focused on what she didn’t want – what she was afraid of – that she refused to see the truth of her desires. Once Rey better understood herself and what she wanted from him, Rose had hope that heartbreak with the younger Solo would resolve.

From what Rose was able to ascertain – from the limited information she was able to drag from Rey – they loved each other, but he refused to repair his relationship with his mother, so he didn’t go back to the Resistance with Rey, which she took personally. Their problems were focused on the *estrangement*, and their fights – and poor treatment of each other – arose from that. If they fixed the estrangement, then the rest would come with time and patience.

Love was difficult and complicated, especially when it was new and foreign. They made mistakes,
but Rose was a firm believer in forgiveness. No matter what happened, another member of that legendary family could help the Resistance. Perhaps Rey could eventually help mend the relationship between mother and son. Then he would join the Resistance, and Rey would have time to go slow and learn how to properly communicate with him. Rose only wished it could be that simple for her.

Rose never had much time for love in her life, but Finn had changed that. When she first met him, she thought he was selfish, arrogant and a coward. But once she had given him a chance – seen his loyalty, compassion, and selfless bravery – she had fallen in love with him. And it wasn’t his smile, his eyes or his lips that caused Rose to fall in love with him. It was his big, kind heart. And presently that big, kind heart was worried about Rey. There was a tinge of regret inside her that she would never earn that devotion from him too.

Even if his heart belonged to someone else, she was grateful that he had been taking her on nightly walks around the temple. Listening to his warm voice regale her with stories of his life as a stormtrooper and the planets he had visited – all safe subjects absent of what had happened between them – were moments that she wouldn’t have wanted to spend anywhere else in the galaxy. She could learn to be content as his friend if only to know such a brave and kind soul. Her sister would have adored him. When she descended the last step, she smiled. He didn’t return it. “That took long enough!” he sighed dramatically. “What’s going on?”

“She’s fine,” she assured him. “She just needed some ‘girl talk.’ She’s going right now to talk to Leia about it, which is probably for the best.” It would have been simpler to tell Finn about Leia’s son – if he even knew she had a son – but she had made a promise to Rey. She could have told him it was another man, but she wanted to avoid hurting him too. He and Rey were close, but she couldn’t be certain he even knew there was another man in Rey’s life. She hoped he would accept her vague and cautious explanation.

“What was the ‘girl talk’ about?” he demanded. “What’s going on?”

She smiled, it was sweet how deeply he cared, even if it was directed toward someone else, someone who didn’t love him in return. “If you want to know, ask her tomorrow after she’s had some time to think about it,” she offered. It was Rey’s choice whether she told him, and it was something he needed to hear from her.

Finn stepped back, and the concern faded to something that closely resembled betrayal. He seemed genuinely hurt. “You’re keeping secrets from me now?”

“No, I keep my promises,” she said softly. She wished she could tell him that it hurt her, too – that if she could, she would tell him everything. But that wouldn’t be fair to anyone. “And I made a promise to Rey. But trust me, she’ll be okay.”
“She kissed Poe!” he shouted. Rose realized that perhaps she had been thinking about it all wrong. Finn was struggling with the revelation that Rey was involved with another man, but it wasn’t the general’s son, it was her *commander*. He was focused on the kiss and the prospect of love between the girl he loved and his best friend. It was a crisis Rose likely wasn’t qualified to help him through, given the circumstances, but she *wanted* to be there for him. That was what people did for the ones they loved. She would carry his burden for him if he let her.

If Rey would go to great lengths to protect the man she cared for – including *attempting* to keep the secret from his own mother – the least Rose could do was have an honest conversation with Finn. “I’m sorry, Finn, I know you love her –”

“Of course, I do!”

Rose had *known* he did. He was a good man, he had made it clear from the very beginning. It shouldn’t have hurt to hear him voice something she already knew, but it did. She bit back tears. “She’s like the younger sister I never had,” he continued, “She’s my family! She’s my first friend, the first person to see me as more than a First Order soldier, and she’s crying after kissing one of my best friends! And I want to know why!”

Realization must have settled on Rose’s face as it settled in the cracks of her broken heart, because the urgency faded from his eyes and was replaced by the confusion. “Wait, what did you think I was freaking out about?”

“I thought… you were upset about the kiss because *you* wanted that… with her.”

It was Finn’s turn to have that final piece of understanding click into place. “You thought… I wanted… Rey and I… Oh, Rose… I thought you knew… I never thought you would think…” He wrapped his strong arms around her, and she melted into him. He was dirty from a supply mission to the dilapidated base, but there was nowhere she would rather be. “I guess I am a dummy, huh?”

“No, I’m the dummy. I’m sorry, Finn, I completely misread the situation. I just… well you know how I feel about you.” Rose said softly as he wrapped her tighter in the embrace.

Finn gave the best hugs. She could practically feel the stress of war evaporate away, replaced by his scent as she breathed him in. She was the perfect height to rest her head on his impressively toned chest. If she could thank the stormtrooper program for one thing, it would be giving this man a noticeably muscular physique. She could *feel* his biceps ripple as he tightened his grip again.
How could one person be so beautiful on the inside and the outside? It truly wasn’t fair to everyone else. She knew that every man she met for the rest of her life would be compared to Finn.

“Do you still feel the same way you did on Crait? About us?” he whispered as if he could read her thoughts. Rose knew she could lie, save face in the acceptance of her unrequited love, but she nodded, knowing it could drive him away. “Look, I’ve never had a … I’m not good at any of this, I don’t know what I’m doing. There’s so much to think about with the war and what’s happening with Rey and where I fit with all of this. You have been so, so patient with me when you deserve an answer. And I want to explain everything to you, I do. That scares me even more, if that makes sense. I’m sorry to keep you waiting so long, but I’m just not ready –”

“Then I’ll wait,” she said, smiling brightly with a glimmer of hope. “However you feel, you’re worth waiting for.”

“I don’t deserve that,” he said, “But it means a lot to me if I know you’ll be by my side at the end.” He pressed his nose to the top of her head, and she shuddered from the warmth that spread through her from that spot all the way down to the tip of her toes. He sighed in her embrace. “Holding you is relaxing. I somehow forget about everything I’ve been freaking out about when you’re right here.”

Rose wished Rey could be honest with Finn, perhaps then he wouldn’t have as many reasons to be stressed as he had been over the last few days. “Would it help,” she asked, “if I say that the kiss meant nothing to Rey, and she is not crying over Poe? I can’t go into specifics, but I hope that helps.”

“Thank you,” he said. His warm breath danced with the stray hair on her forehead as she tilted her head to look up at him. “I’m sure you hate being caught in the middle, but I’m just worried. I can’t ask Rey, because I know she won’t tell me. She has changed to someone I don’t know lately.”

“Rey’s trying to figure out exactly who she is and become the last hope for the Resistance at the same time, I’m sure that’s a lot of pressure.” Rose could feel the tension in his body still. As relaxed as he may have felt, she knew there was something still bothering him. “Finn, is there something else wrong?”

Finn was quiet for a moment; she could practically hear his thoughts debating whether to tell her. Finally, he relented. “There’s one thing. It might be crazy, but I have to know the truth, or I’ll lose it.” She nodded against his warm chest to encourage him further. With a final sigh, he forced himself to ask her. “Does this have anything to do with Kylo Ren?”
“What?” Rose gasped, pushing out of his embrace to study his face. “No! Why would this involve that creature!”

He sighed in relief, running his hand over the back of his neck. “I wish I could tell you,” he sighed. “But it seems that Rey has many secrets with people she trusts will keep them.”

Rose accepted his answer, but her mind was whirling with possibilities of how Rey’s stress could be related to the new Supreme Leader. Did she fear facing him? Was there more to the story than his defeat at her hands on Starkiller? Or did it involve Ben Solo? Was he in danger? “Well, this isn’t a bitter enemy type of secret, so I think we’re safe,” she said, though her stomach churned with dread. Kylo Ren was a monster, and she was terrified of the possibility that his evil could have had an impact on a beautiful soul like Rey. “Why would you think this involved him? Did he... do something to her?”

There was misery and fear darkening Finn’s usually luminous eyes, and she wondered if her concern was right and Rey had suffered at the hands of that creature. Finn did nothing confirm or quell her fears, however, choosing to ignore her question to focus back on the secret she kept instead. “If Rey made you promise something, but it put the entire Resistance in danger if you kept that secret, what would you do?”

Rose shrugged. Rey would never do anything like that. The secret she was keeping was about a lover, not treason. There was no danger to the Resistance other than Kylo Ren and the First Order. To alleviate his fears, she answered the question anyway. “I’d give her a chance to come clean to everyone first and do the right thing. But this isn’t one of those secrets. Don’t worry.”

Finn was quiet for a moment, then nodded. “Ready for that walk?” he smiled, pulling off his jacket and wrapping it around her shoulders. It wasn’t cold, but at that moment, she would have worn it in the hottest desert.

“With you? Always.”

They followed a path further into the valley and away from the tree-line. Rose wouldn’t have been scared to walk through the trees, but Finn warned her of creatures in the jungle that hunted at night. He knew his way around the area, so she trusted him. It didn’t much matter where they walked anyway.

The temple they had chosen for a base had the best cover, but further into the valley, there were several more. Most had crumbled into ruins, but the impressive architecture was still noticeable. Rose wondered what those people were like. She wondered if their villages were war-torn, or if
they had lived in peace. She wondered what had happened to them. Rose cleared her throat and broke the silence as they approached a set of ruins. “So do you… remember anything about your homeworld or family?”

“No, nothing,” he said finally as he busied himself with climbing over a boulder toward the entrance. “But I want to, I think, I haven’t decided yet.”

He pivoted around and grabbed her hand to pull her the rest of the way up. His hand was warm and comforting, and she waited for the moment of disappointment when he would release her. They climbed over the top, but his fingers remained interlaced with hers. He lifted his glowrod to illuminate the entrance, and she followed him into the darkness. “Maybe after this war, you can find them,” she said. Her voice bounced across the stone walls.

“Maybe. I don’t know if there’s anyone left to find,” he said, distracted by his moving the glowrod to the entrance of each room. Though they had clearly been made by the same hands, this temple was different than their temporary base. The rooms were larger and more opulent, the carving in the stone was more intricate. As they entered a high-arching room, he turned to her. “I feel like all we ever talk about is me. Tell me about your family.”

Rose shrugged before following him inside. She enjoyed learning about him. He was interesting – worldly and funny. What was she supposed to say about her quiet life on a mining world with the family he’d never had? “There’s not much to me,” she said, running her free hand over the carving in the stone wall. Something in the air around her caused her to lower her voice in deference to the energy around her, as if she were entering a library… or mausoleum. “I’m from Hays Minor. My father’s name was Hue, and my mother’s name was Thanya. She flew OreDiggers for the Central Ridge Mining company. They had Paige and then me, and… we were happy. We didn’t have much, but we had each other. When our parents were working, we spent time with our grandparents Etta and Storm, and when they were home we watched holodramas – my favorites were the ones about Fathiers – and we played hologames and went on expeditions catching and releasing quad-hoppers from the mines.”

“I would have never guessed about the Fathiers,” he chuckled. He led her farther into the ruins, down a long, winding stairwell. It was damp and cold and reminded her of the mines on Hayes Minor. A chill threaded its way down her spine, but she wasn’t scared, especially not with him by her side. She could barely make out his silhouette in the darkness. “Where’d you learn how to fly?” his voice echoed against the stone.

“My grandmother’s Z-95 Headhunter Simulator. I was always – ” As they entered a section of steps that had crumbled under the test of weapons or time, Rose released his hand to turn around and climb backward down the debris. She slipped as a piece of stone disintegrated under feet. Her balance tipped her backward. With incredibly quick reflexes, his hand shot out and wrapped around her wrist. He pulled her into him, saving her from a certain fall. His heart thundered in
panic, but she stared up at him in awe.

There was something changing between them, she could feel it. It was electric, magnetizing; it felt almost palpable in the air around them. That powerful yearning to kiss him overwhelmed her again, but Rose wasn’t the type to make the same mistake twice. That didn’t stop the flutter in her chest.

She was nearly distracted from the words when his voice vibrated through her chest. “You were always, what?”

“Clumsy and awkward,” she whispered as he huffed a soft chuckle. “I was quite talented at crashing that ship, though.”

“So… nothing’s changed then?” he said with a smug half-smirk. She shoved him playfully in the arm and turned to quickly finish the descent down the stairwell. She giggled as he scrambled down the steps after her. He caught her at the bottom, lifting her off her feet with one arm. “Let’s see you escape me now!” His laugh was infectious, but if she’d had the breath to spare, she would have told him that she would never dream of escaping him. The laughter died, however, and her feet touched the floor again as they both noticed the two stone sarcophagi pushed back against the far wall.

Rose crossed the distance in wonder, sliding her fingers over the smooth stone. The people buried there must have been important; great craftsmanship and time had been dedicated to carving them. They had mattered to someone, but they were all but forgotten to history. Their names, their stories, everyone that remembered them were gone. Even their bones encased in that stone could have become nothing more than dust centuries ago. All that was left as proof that they lived was carvings on a slab of stone.

At first, it was depressing, but her opinion changed the longer she considered it. Of all the billions of beings that had existed in the galaxy – who had lived, died, and were forever lost to the stars – at least there was proof that these people had lived. Their stories may have been forgotten, but they still mattered to the two young people that happened upon them, if only for a moment. It was macabre but oddly beautiful. “How did you join the Resistance?” Finn asked from the darkness on the other side of the sarcophagus.

“The First Order stole our mines and forced the others to work as slaves in miserable conditions to power their murder machines. My sister came to me one night and told me that we had to stop the First Order, or our world would be destroyed by the pollution and our people would continue dying until there was no one left. So we did. We blew up a dozen OreDiggers, and they had to shut down production for a few days. That gave us time to escape to the Resistance to join the fight against the First Order. I thought my parents begged us to go because the Resistance was the best chance to defeat the evil, but I think they did it to save us. I found out once we joined that the First Order
used our world in a weapons test. Everyone was gone in an instant.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

Rose smiled, though she knew he couldn’t see it. “It’s okay, I like talking about them. It keeps their memory alive, you know?” Finn rapped his knuckles across the stone as if he was contemplating the significance of those buried there as well. When his hand met hers on the stone, he grasped her fingers gently. They kept their hands clasped as they met at the base of the sarcophagus. Finn led her away, and Rose felt a clench of sorrow in her chest. How long would it be until the two people buried there were found again? Decades? Centuries?

“I wish I could’ve done that, for Slip,” Finn said softly as they walked aimlessly through the darkness. “Buried him.” Rose’s steps faltered at his admission, but she corrected it swiftly. It was the first time Finn had opened up to her about his past. Certainly, he had told her stories, but never how he felt about it. Finn had made the choice not to fight for the First Order, and, eventually, he found his reason to fight for the Resistance, but she never knew anything deeper. He didn’t regret defecting, she could tell that much, but his stories of the other stormtroopers sounded surprisingly fond. Those were men they would have to actively fight against in the inevitable war.

Rose was cautious with her words. She knew this was significant to him. “Your friend in the stormtrooper program? You didn’t tell me he died.”

“It was on Tuanul, our first battle. I knew he wasn’t ready, but I thought I could protect him. War was different than the simulations.” In the corridor before them, there was a ghostly ray of light. A crack through the stone in the ceiling was large enough to allow moonlight through from the Barkhesh sky. As they passed through the light, Rose saw tears illuminated on his face. With a soft jerk of his hand, she stopped him, and he turned to her with a profound sorrow in his eyes she would never have expected.

“I only realized after Poe told his version of the battle, but I think… I think he killed Slip. I wasn’t fast enough, and Slip was shot. I held his hand as he died. And no one in the First Order cared. He was nothing to them; they left him where he fell. So I chose not to fight, because I realized I didn’t have a reason to fight anymore. But Kylo Ren noticed; he stopped in the middle of battle and stared at me. He had every reason to kill me, but he didn’t, and I’ll never know why. When we got back to the Finalizer, Phasma asked me to submit my weapon for evaluation. She would have seen that I didn’t fire it.”

“I was scared, so I ran. I didn’t rescue Poe. I needed him to pilot. I’m here now because I couldn’t save my best friend from the man who became my best friend.” Rose was taken aback by the admission. Finn had lost Slip. He had tried, and thought he failed, to save Poe on Jakku. When Rey was captured, he refused to allow it to happen again. He flew onto an enemy base to save her. What
had happened to Slip had clearly shaped him. Had there been others toward whom Finn felt that
loyalty? Finn’s relationship with their enemy was more complicated than she had first assumed.
“Slip is the reason why I’m not fighting for the First Order, and I left him out in that desert.”

“Hey.” She curled the fabric of her long, green shirt around her fingers to wipe the tears from his
face. “You didn’t leave him; you stayed by his side as he died. You did what you could, Finn,
*they* left him.” Finn nodded in response. His shoulders shuddered as he quietly sobbed. Finn had
spoken of his past many times to her since she had awoken, but she had never seen Finn like this.
She wondered distantly if Poe knew the struggles Finn faced. She wondered if *anyone* did. “And
Finn,” she said, cupping his face in her palms so that she could hold his stare, “he might have been
the motivator, but you made that choice because you wanted to be more than that.”

Finn brought his hand to his cheek and grasped her hand. His thumb drifted soothingly over her
skin. “Thank you,” he said, “for listening. And not… judging me. I’m surrounded by all these
strong people with stories worse than mine, and I’m crying over a stormtrooper—”

“It’s not a competition.” She smiled tenderly, and he squeezed her hand tighter. “You’ve suffered
tremendous loss, and you have every right to feel what you do. I think we all have these moments,
and I’m grateful you included me in yours. Slip wasn’t just a stormtrooper, Finn. I heard the way
you talk about him. He was your only family before the Resistance. I would never judge you for
that.”

“He was,” Finn replied, voice cracking with emotion. “I lost my family and then him and almost
Poe and Rey, and I don’t know if I could do that again. I don’t know if I’m strong enough.” With
that admission, Rose understood. Finn wasn’t pushing her away because he didn’t care for her, but
because he *did*. He was afraid of losing the ones he cared about most, and he thought keeping her
at a safe distance would protect him from more pain. It wouldn’t. She knew Finn loved with all his
heart, whether he admitted it to himself or not. He couldn’t run from it.

Rose chose to be brave. She stepped closer and placed her other hand on his solid chest. “I
understand. I lost everyone, too, and I know that fear. It’s hard to open your heart when the people
you love could be taken from you. That’s the reality of war; that is what I knew I was signing up for.
Wherever she is, my sister doesn’t regret it, and neither will I, even if I lose my life or the
people I care for. We are fighting for the future of the galaxy, and that means sacrificing our own
promise of tomorrow. I could die tomorrow, you could die tomorrow – all we have is this day. This
moment. I would rather love and lose, than spend all my ‘todays’ safe, but alone. When I die,
whenever the Force decides it to be, I couldn’t think of a better death than leaving with those I love
by my side. Otherwise, what’s the point of living? Do you know what I mean?”

Rose had barely finished before his lips crashed into hers. Rose gasped into his mouth as his other
hand pulled her into his embrace. He held her tightly against him, and she had never felt so safe.
Her hands slid back into his hair as she lost herself in the warmth and weightlessness of his kiss.
When she finally dragged her lips away from his, they were both panting and out of breath. In the moonlight that enveloped them, there was a hopeful peace in his eyes that had been missing for days. He smiled, something soft and tender. “I think I’m beginning to.”

Chapter End Notes

Brief mention of death

Rose and Finn encounter a tomb
Jealousy

Rose misunderstands Finn and feels brief jealousy
Chapter Notes

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Kylo forcefully opened the hatch and climbed out of the cockpit into the vast hangar. After
checking Blue over for damage, he stumbled in a daze around the right side of the fighter to survey the extent of the destruction. He paused as a wave of nausea rolled through him. His knees buckled under his trembling weight, and he used the Force to remain upright. He pinched the bridge his nose, clearing the tears forming in the corners of his eyes in the process.

He was a naïve, weak-minded fool. He believed it was real. Again. As if he would ever be wanted for more than power. He had only ever been an enemy to her. She hated him, wanted nothing to do with him, just like everyone else. He wasn’t surprised to find her with another man – why wouldn’t they gravitate toward her light – but of all the anarchists she could have chosen, she kissed Dameron. And she did it when she knew he was there. She probably dragged him there for that sole purpose, because he knew he hadn’t been thinking of her while engaged in a dog-fight with pirates.

Why did she choose Dameron? Did she know their history? Had she chosen Leia’s surrogate son because she knew it would torment him? Kylo had been inside the pilot’s mind. Dameron would never appreciate her strength in the Force, he would never understand her. Not like Kylo did. He would fear her as they all feared Ben Solo. He would never understand how special she was. Poe Dameron hadn’t allowed himself to be close to anyone but a droid since his mother died. His only interest in her was superficial. Carnal

Another wave of nausea crashed over him.

The usual anger burned underneath his skin, pumping forcefully through his veins. Hatred was there too. And, of course, the sharp, cold claws of the darkness dragging him into the shadows where creatures like him belonged. He had always lived in the shadows; first in the shadows of legends and then in the shadows of darkness. And that was the worst part – why he hated seeing her with the traitor and the pilot. Or his mother. They were everything he was not. He and Rey had a connection that no one else had, but she didn’t see the bond as anything but a curse. Why wouldn’t she, he would never be anything but a monster. He had thought he could be enough for Rey, that she understood him, that she wanted him. She wanted him all right – wanted him as a power piece like a Mantellian Savrip in her galactic wargame. He had never been good enough, he would never be good enough; not for Sidious or the First Order or the Knights, not for his parents or his uncle or his grandfather.

Not for Rey.

Or himself.

His stomach twisted as something darker possessed his senses. It was at once burning, tearing and crushing him into nothing. He wasn't certain whether his difficulty breathing or the overwhelming
desire to empty his stomach was more pressing. His body was shaking, and if there hadn't been stormtroopers watching his every move, he would have dropped to his knees, screamed until his voice was hoarse and pounded the floor with his fists until they were bloody and raw to match the wounded ache in his chest.

The despair escalated until every last thought was directed at stabilizing his emotions. He knew it wouldn't work; he had become an expert in his own violent outbursts, and he knew this would not end without destruction. The power of the Force was drawn to his fingers. He clenched them to contain it, but they itched with the need for release. His mind replayed her lips pressed against those of the treacherous drunkard, her hateful words echoing in his ears. He closed his eyes, picturing the softness in her eyes in the hut, her promise, but nothing could neutralize the piercing ache that threatened to overwhelm him.

When the rapidly expanding energy had become uncontrollable, he turned in desperation for a source to unleash the emotions suffocating the Force around him. His eyes settled on an unoccupied TIE fighter. He clenched and unclenched his fists in one last effort for control, but it was useless. As his fingers curled, the frame of the fighter began to buckle, caving in upon itself. Each crunch of metal that further rendered the ship unrecognizable tempered the storm inside him. When his body shuddered, finally exhausted by the uninhibited release of power, the ship was a sparkling heap of twisted metal in the hangar. Part of him felt awe; he’d never destroyed an entire ship before. Despite the violent display, the nauseating ache quickly returned. The images of Rey with Leia’s surrogate son replayed relentlessly in his mind.

_I told you, the echo of a dead voice whispered in his mind. You’re a monster... Something to be feared...They all hate you...They never loved you....No one will ever love you...They lie to you...They will always betray you...You’re nothing to them...But power... Power never lies... Power never leaves...You could have been more powerful than Vader...But you have your father’s heart, young Solo...You are weak and foolish...Unwise and unbalanced... Because you have compassion for her._

His master may have been gone, but the creature’s persuasive words were forever entrenched in the darkness of his mind. He suppressed a wave of sorrow that threatened to release the tears crashing against the floodgates of his eyes.

_There are troopers here, resist these childish emotions. It meant nothing. She means nothing. Get yourself together, you weak, unbalanced fool. Complete the mission._

A familiar voice echoed over his comlink.

“Supreme Leader.”
“General Hux,” Kylo sighed into the comlink. “I have just made contact with the cargo freighter.” Much to your disappointment, I’m sure. He swept his hair from his forehead and straightened his clothes, making his appearance more orderly out of habit.

“I’m looking at the data reports as we speak. The Silencer’s deflector shield generator and weapons systems are all online and functioning within normal parameters,” his general informed him. His insinuating tone immediately irritated Kylo.

“They weren’t when I had to explode a proton torpedo outside my fighter,” he said sharply, clenching his fist to suppress his anger.

I should have created a Force shield... or halted it. But I wasn’t thinking clearly with her around. Again.

“Is there damage?”

“No, I used the Force to explode a torpedo meters from my cockpit, but there’s no damage at all,” he whispered sarcastically to himself.

“I can complete the mission,” he replied in the comlink.

Hux’s tone was haughty and condescending. “I’ll have my men look at it upon your return. It’s curious, Ren, because the generator does not switch off and on at will, and multiple systems failure is practically unheard of.”

We’ll see what Sienar-Jaemus has to say about Blue’s data. I know what I experienced.“It’s curious indeed, Hux.”

“Perhaps it is time to admit that the Supreme Leader does not belong in the front lines battle?”

“Duly noted, General.” He switched the comlink off.
A dozen pirates who were successful in breaking through the cargo freighter’s defenses had been hunted down and assembled in the hangar by a squad of stormtroopers. They awaited his orders on the fate of the prisoners. Though it was all semblance, they knew the order that would be given. There was only one fate for terrorists against the First Order. There are no prisoners; the only reprieve is a delayed execution. And these pirates have no useful information to necessitate a delay.

As he lumbered toward the group, a lone starship casually entered the hangar. The stormtroopers raised their blasters, but he dismissed them with a wave of his hand. He was intrigued. Who would be bold or foolish enough to land a starship on a First Order cargo freighter at the feet of the Supreme Leader without a single offensive strike? He felt inexplicably drawn to the ship as if destiny itself awaited him on board.

The boarding ramp lowered, and he stopped at the bottom, waiting in apprehensive anticipation. A short, orange humanoid alien approached him, supporting her weight on a cane. The creature did not appear threatening – dressed in a gray cap, sweater, and pants with a darker gray vest. The only articles of clothing that weren’t gray were the creature’s brightly colored socks. His instinct fettered his nerves. Nothing about this creature read “dangerous,” but he knew better than anyone that appearances were deceiving. His intuition further cautioned against a false sense of security the moment he recognized her energy as one of a Force-sensitive.

Kylo was grateful his mental shields had been secured fully in an attempt to block Rey from the explosion. He left them in place to mask his emotional turmoil from the bond, refusing to allow her to know how deeply she had affected him. Those concerns were abandoned in the face of a more formidable opponent. This humanoid was strong in the Force; he had to assume she had the skills of his former master. In an attempt to better conceal his vulnerable emotions, he focused the majority of his energy toward the shields, as he would if he were standing before Sidious himself.

There was something about her that captivated him, however, that immediately lulled him into complacency. Before he could contemplate his impetuous actions, he had knelt before her. How powerful was she in the Force to command his deference without the familiar blanket of mind control? It was terrifying.

“Supreme Leader, I presume,” she said, adjusting her large, corrective goggles over her venerable brown irises. Her magnified eyes intently studied his, her stare penetrating straight through any shield he had fortified against her. For a man prone to concealing his expressive features with a mask, this type of vulnerability was a threat he actively fought to avoid. But the moment was almost dreamlike – trancelike – and the fear, mistrust, and defensiveness that should have overwhelmed him was bizarrely missing. He knew she could read his soul like a book, but he did not attempt to withdraw from her knowing stare. Instead, he found himself craving to know her judgment, holding her gaze expectantly as if she was the embodiment of the Cosmic Force.
He accepted her extended hand respectfully. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I am Maz, dear, and I have come to request the release of those men,” she smiled, indicating the pirates behind him. Who was she to demand that of him?

“Maz Kanata,” he said. “And what makes you believe you are in a position to negotiate?” His voice was hesitant. He may have had the galaxy in the palm of his hand, but instinctively he understood that he was far out of his depth with her. She was unsettlingly quiet as she leaned closer and readjusted her goggles. After a moment, she nodded to herself and smiled.

Kylo knew he should swallow his question, turn around and get back in his ship. He should go back to the First Order and pretend none of it had happened. He should focus on his treasonous general and severing the bond. But he found the words tumbling out anyway. “What do you think you see?”

“I see the conflict in your eyes, dear child,” she said...kindly. There was not a flicker of fear in her eyes, only the same kindness he had heard it in her words. He had burned down her temple; she had every reason not to treat him kindly.

“You’re Force-sensitive, I am sure you can feel it in the Force as well,” he said categorically, attempting to gain control of the discussion. “My conflict is not some great secret. Those stormtroopers behind me could likely fill holobooks with their stories about my ‘conflict.’ Is that why you don’t fear me? Do you, unwisely, believe you can get what you want by stoking my inner conflict? Or trying to turn me? Save me? I do not need more blood of the good-intentioned on my hands. I have inspired enough people to make foolish decisions in the name of the conflict they thought they saw in me.”

“I agree that it would be unwise to try to save you,” she said, narrowing her eyes as she studied his response, “as only you have the capability to do that. I can only speak the truth as I see it, but your last statement is curious. Do you truly believe those who acted out of love for you were foolish?”

_They never loved me. I was only ever _worth my power in the Force_.

That was not a box he would open with her. Her presence held him in an almost trance-like state, the truth spilling from his lips unrestricted, but her last question unmuted the screams of self-preservation from his intuition. She couldn’t be trusted. That lightsaber was supposed to be _his_ when he had become a Jedi Knight. Lando had hidden his grandfather’s lightsaber from him, he knew that much. And Rey had said she touched the lightsaber on Takodana. Why Kylo had never considered Lando – and Han’s – ‘friend the “Pirate Queen” was anyone’s guess. She had kept
it hidden away in her temple. Until Han had brought Rey, the traitor, and the droid to her. Maz couldn’t be trusted, because she had given away his lightsaber to her, and then she had given it the traitor! If the lightsaber had remained hidden away, then perhaps the Force would have never connected them, and he would have been content with her hating him. “I believe giving away my grandfather’s saber is foolish.”

Maz, to her credit, didn’t miss a beat. “The lightsaber called to her.”

“It belonged to me.”

“Not anymore,” she said firmly, but not unkindly. “You chose a destiny that betrayed that legacy.”

He shook his head. No, she was wrong. He had done everything to fulfill the legacy of the monster everyone feared he would become. What did Maz know of that legacy? What did anyone, other than the man destined to become him? “This is the legacy of my grandfather.”

“The truth is inside you, it always has been. The legacy of your grandfather was not this.”

“His legacy was to bring balance to the Force through darkness,” he challenged. Kylo knew the legacy well, better than anyone. Vader was unrivaled in his power in the Force. He would have brought order and law to the galaxy. He did. The New Republic destroyed the progress that had been made, but that was the legacy. Kylo was fulfilling it.

“That is not shocking conviction for a boy who calls himself ‘Kylo Ren,’” she smiled, patting him gently. “You have much to learn.”

“I am Kylo Ren,” he insisted.

“I have been alive for centuries, dear boy. I have seen the rise and fall of empires in many different forms. The battle has always been the same: the light versus the dark. That has been the only fight... and I see that fight now – in you. You see, if you live long enough, you recognize the same eyes in different people, and I have seen evil in many different eyes. The eyes in front of me now, however, do not belong to an evil man. They do not belong to a man named Kylo Ren. You know who you are; I would recognize your eyes anywhere, young Solo.”

“How can you not see evil in my eyes? You know what I’ve done.”
“Evil actions do not necessarily make an evil man, evil intentions do,” she said. Her lips flickered into a regretful smile. “If you wish to know evil, remember the eyes of the man who created Kylo Ren. You have been led astray, but these are your first steps in correcting your wayward path. You have ancient eyes, dear child, eyes of a soul meant for destinies more important this.”

“Led astray?” he scoffed. “No. You cannot possibly know what I’ve done – who I’ve done it to – there is nothing that can change what I did. It’s too late for regret. I stood by and said nothing as they obliterated an entire system, not all of them government officials, and I still stand behind the justification of their reasoning. I have murdered entire villages. I have tortured and killed hundreds in the name of the Order. Children. I murdered my own father. I intended to do all of that. It doesn’t matter what you see in my eyes, or what you think you see. I am as evil as my master was.”

“Your defense only serves to prove my point. You know your actions were wrong, and you desire to change. Your only hindrance is your misguided belief that you no longer have a choice. Your intentions have always been guided by another. You do not have a master plan to control and enslave the galaxy; you want revenge for what you’ve suffered and the power that gives you the control to do it. You want a destiny that you have been misled into believing is your only choice. Your eyes are those of a boy who is haunted by his past, who is choosing to run away rather than face it. I see exhaustion from sleepless nights. And loneliness. You fear to stay, but also, fear to leave –”

“Stop.”

“You know in your heart what I see in your eyes. You know who you truly are, what you have to do. You may very well have to atone for your crimes. Choosing the right path will not absolve you of your sins. But..you are not evil, child. You have chosen a wayward path, but you are not lost. You can still make the right choice, for yourself, and the galaxy. But first, you must let go of the past.”

He dragged his eyes from her piercing stare to watch the stormtroopers talking and joking with one another. When they noticed his stare, they stopped. He sighed. “I don’t know how.”

“If you choose salvation, you don’t have to walk the path alone.” His stare returned to hers, and she winked. He wondered exactly what she could discover through only his eyes.

“I can’t,” he whispered.
“No one said it would be easy,” she said with a shrug. “If it was, then salvation and atonement would mean nothing. You know the truth. You search for peace, but the peace you seek will not be found in punishing the sins of the past. Eliminating those who have wronged you and crushing your own identity will not ease the pain you suffered. Nor will tearing yourself apart. You will only find peace in forgiveness, for others and for yourself. I do not envy your path – forgiveness is the most difficult life lesson to learn. But forgiveness is not for them, it’s for you. Remember, your past helped shape you, but it does not define the decisions you make here.... right now. What happens now is your choice and your choice alone.”

“What if I don’t want to be saved?” He expected her to grow frustrated or give up, as anyone else would, but the kindness in her eyes never faltered. “Right or wrong, I chose the path I did. I am broken, the scars will not disappear. I was lost to darkness long ago, and that darkness will only hurt the ones who try to save me. It’s too late.”

“They can keep you pointed in the right direction, but you’re right, no one can save you. This is your course to follow, and your choice to make.” She hummed. “Though, I wonder, how many other creatures of darkness worried about hurting the ones they loved? I believe you are not as far gone as you may think.”

Kylo broke her stare again, searching for his droid in the hangar. Blue was arguing with a sentry droid. “As deep as your emotional scars run,” Maz said, attempting to regain his focus. “I see your yearning for love and belonging, which led you down this path in the first place. And I fear that for you, life would be meaningless without love, because you have a great propensity for it.”

“I don’t know how to love,” he said distractedly as he watched the droids. Evidently, the sentry droid did something Blue didn’t like, and he shocked the white droid. Kylo suppressed a smirk.

“You don’t know how to be loved,” she corrected.

That’s because no one ever loved me. Not that he expected them to, there wasn’t much about him to love. “Love is a weakness. It’s foolish. It hurts…”

“The essence of love is forgiveness, young Solo.” She said it as if she knew anything about his life. He had tried, and he had failed. He turned back to face her as the old wounds of betrayal and abandonment were reopened.

“And what about me? Who’ll forgive me? I’m a monster, a burden. They hate me. They never wanted me. They never loved me. They will never love –”
Maz’s voice was the coldest he had heard it yet. “Are those your lies or his?”

“They’re not lies. No one has ever loved me. They said it, but they didn’t mean it. I know it.” It didn’t matter where the words had come from, it was the truth. She could say what she wanted, but he’d lived it. His own family didn’t want him. They lied to him, they left him, and they tried to kill him. He didn’t know much about love, but he knew that wasn’t it. “Love always has conditions. The problem is no one tells me what they are.”

“They failed you, yes, but they loved you,” she said. “I was dear friends with your father; I know his heart well. It is the same heart beating inside you. It is the same heart that will save you if you just listen to it.”

“My father’s heart led to his death at my hands. It was foolish and... meaningless.”

“Was it?” she smiled knowingly, placing her hand on his cheek as his father had when he drew his last breath. Kylo winced at the contact, but controlled the violent reaction that bubbled up inside him. The memory broke through his defenses, and the words left his lips before he had a chance to catch himself.

“What does it matter? I can’t change the past, and I can’t be who I once was. It’s too late.”

Maz raised her cane until it was pressed against his wounded side. He watched as she pressed it forward and a sharp pain radiated up his side. When his mind had broken through the shock, he backed away with a hiss.

“What did you do that for!”

Maz smiled. “What does it matter? It can’t be changed. It's in the past.”

“Still hurts,” he grumbled.

“Of course, the past hurts, child. Life leaves us with scars as reminders of what we have overcome. They are reminders of how they have shaped us into who we are. That doesn’t make the wounds that formed them any less painful. The past will always be behind you no matter how much time
and energy you waste in trying to pretend it isn’t there. Erasing the past and the pain we endured would be easy, but that would require erasing who we are. Good or bad, the past is part of you. There are only two options. Stay the course, run from your past….” Kylo sensed movement in the Force. She lifted the cane again, quicker this time, but he was ready for it. He manipulated the Force to freeze the cane before it contacted his wounded side.

“Ah, see?” she smiled. “The other option. You learned from it.”

“You know this isn’t that simple.”

“No, but that doesn’t make it any less true. When I look into your eyes, I see the eyes of a boy resigned to his fate, but your father was right. And so was that girl. It’s not too late.”

His heart surged, and he became increasingly aware of its steady beat. It was as if it had been dead and the mention of her had awoken it again. “What girl?” Maz stared directly through his pretense.

“Your heart knows what girl, kiddo. And I will tell you the same thing I told her moments before your paths collided. ‘The belonging you seek is not behind you, it is ahead.’ And to your father, I told him, ‘Go home.’ You and your father are more similar than you’d like to think,” she chuckled. “On that note, I’m going to go collect my men and bring them home. Or, whatever is left of the castle you destroyed.” She began to walk away, and only then – when her knowing stare was fixated somewhere else – did the trance-like state shatter.

“What does all of this matter?” He called after her. “The peace, the salvation, the belonging – what does it matter if it ends in my death? That is the only way this can end.”

“Yes, it is,” she agreed, “But isn’t that how it ends for us all? It’s only important what we do before we get there.”

“Wait.” She had begun to walk away, but his hesitant voice halted her her steps. When he didn’t continue, she turned to face him. He extended his right arm toward her, palm outward, with his fingers splayed. Any of the other sentients in the hangar who had the unfortunate experience of a run-in with Kylo Ren would presume he was preparing to physically assault or psychologically torture her with the Force. Not even a glimmer of fear crossed Maz Kanata’s eyes, however, as she returned his stare. After a moment, he lowered his arm.

“What are they?” she asked, referring to the memory of numbers she had willingly allowed him to
force into her mind.

“Coordinates.”

She smiled perceptively, her eyes alight in the secret the two shared. “But she stays away from the *Falcon.*” Maz nodded once and then chuckled to herself. With that, she made her way to the other pirates. The troopers turned toward him, and he nodded half-heartedly in acknowledgment. Kylo stood in silence as she escorted the pirates onto her ship. He watched the ship take off and disappear into the stars. Only when he could no longer sense her presence did the calm blanket over his emotions fade away. The anger, fear and self-loathing returned. He stalked to the other end of the hangar and stopped before the stormtroopers.

“There were no survivors,” he dictated, waving his hand as he manipulated their minds with the Force. Then he turned on his heels and made his way to his damaged fighter without looking back.
Chapter End Notes

Jealousy

Kylo is still reacting poorly to that kiss

Mild violence

Kylo crushes a TIE fighter
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story is 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Rey was surrounded by her makeshift family, at a makeshift table, in the large temple hall that had been transformed into a makeshift mess hall, inside their makeshift base. Her neck was sore from her makeshift bed, and she was hopelessly lost in the foreign language of the Jedi text that would help her become a makeshift Jedi for a makeshift rebellion in a war she wanted nothing to do with. Rey had always been able to make something out of nothing – that wasn’t the problem. It was that she had been given a glimpse of something real – a home, a belonging – it was the one thing she could never have, and the only thing she wanted. It darkened the joy of everything else.

It was night, the moon high over Barkesh, and the others were… drunk. Rey tried to understand when they told her they did it to forget, but she couldn’t help the resentment she felt when she remembered what her parents had done to her for the vile liquid. She sat quietly, an outsider, as they shared animated stories of their travels, of how they met, of how they survived their missions against the First Order. The people of the Resistance were kind to her, offered her friendship, yet she still felt as if she were alone. She was different; they didn’t understand her. There was only one person who did, but he was their enemy. She wondered whether he had ever felt lonely in a crowded room. Growing irritated with herself for allowing her thoughts to wander again, she tried harder to fit in with people who offered her everything she should want.

Poe spoke of his harrowing escapes from the First Order in the early days of the Resistance. Finn told stories of his and Rose’s rough start and their adventures on Canto Bight. Rose told stories of her sister and her bravery in the face of evil. Rey half-listened quietly, enjoying their tales of love and failure, and, ultimately, hope. They all had their defining moments that brought them to the Resistance, their reason to fight. But she couldn’t share; what could she say?

She had never intended to join the Resistance. She knew it was the right thing to do to help Finn return Beebee-Ate and the map to the Resistance, but her plan was always to go back to Jakku. Finn had asked her to run away with him, but she didn’t. When faced with the Force vision from Luke’s lightsaber, she wanted nothing to do with it. She ran. Right into Kylo. She had no plans for when she escaped, but she had never considered finding the Resistance, not until Finn and Han risked their lives to rescue her.

If Kylo hadn’t killed Han, if Finn’s life hadn’t hung in the balance, if she hadn’t become some sort of hero to them for defeating him – then she wouldn’t have gone to Luke in search of answers. She thought Luke would help her. Maz had told her she would find her belonging if she brought him back. But he wouldn’t teach her, he wouldn’t help her find her belonging – he only came back long enough to save them.

Someone had been there for her, however – someone who didn't fight for the Resistance. How
could she find belonging with them when she couldn’t tell them the truth? How could she share her hopes when they’d call her insane, or worse, treasonous? How could she share her failures when they wouldn’t mourn them with her? For better or worse, she was connected eternally with another person, and she couldn’t share her feelings about it with any of them. She couldn’t sleep, couldn’t eat, couldn’t think since he disappeared, because she was sick with worry, but she couldn’t explain it. They wouldn’t understand if she told them what was tearing her apart. She was an outsider, as she always had been. She loved them, but they had no idea who she was.

Artoo interrupted her focus as he beeped in binary across the table at Poe. She had been lost in her own thoughts, but she caught the words 'holocall' and 'Nal Hutta.' Poe eyed her carefully before turning to Artoo. Thankfully Beebee-Ate created a distraction when he came careening out from under the table and bumped into Artoo. That set off a droid argument in binary that carried on out into the hall. With the distraction, she could have let the matter drop entirely.

The words left her lips before she considered them. “Nal Hutta? Isn't that the Hutts? Why would you have a holocall from there?”

“You misheard; he said 'Nakadia,” Poe said, his voice even, though slightly slurred. He hid his lie well, his face was open and honest, but she knew what she heard. She knew what she felt in the Force. “It's a mid-rim agricultural world; it was the location of the New Republic Senate when I was young.” It might have been enough for her friends, but for her, it confirmed everything she needed to know. Poe was not to be trusted. He was hiding something.

She should have dropped it, or at least attempted to hide her accusatory tone. She had her own secrets, after all. “I guess I need to brush up on my binary.”

“I guess I need a hearing enhancer since, I swear, when I walked by your room the other night, I heard –”

“Rey, how are you?” Finn asked suddenly, knocking over his cup of liquor in his enthusiasm. The alcohol sloshed over the table, red like blood. She closed her eyes in her desperate attempt not to imagine that it looked just like the blood she had spilled on Starkiller – Kylo’s blood – on the night he nearly died by her hand. Now the bond was silent, and she feared the worst. If he was… if he was gone, then it would be all her fault. She had distracted him from his mission. She had said cruel, unnecessary things… again. “Sorry,” he apologized, wiping up the liquid he had spilled. He must have noticed she was near tears, because his face was shadowed with concern. “Rey?”

“I’m fine,” she replied. She could feel Poe’s eyes on her, but she refused to meet his challenging stare.
Finn either didn’t understand that her blunt tone was a deliberate attempt to change the subject, or he was too drunk to notice. “I’m worried about you. I think we all are. You seem distant lately, especially after whatever happened to you the other night between you and –”

“We’re not talking about that,” Poe interrupted him, eyes suddenly downcast at the food he was pushing around his plate. The food he was wasting.

“Well, you know what I mean,” Finn murmured with a lazy wave of his hand. “You barely ever come out of your room, which you keep in a constant state of darkness. You never smile anymore. We miss the old Rey.”

The old Rey was weak... a fool... what does a stormtrooper know of the complexities of the Force... can he not see your strength... your power? I told you... they don’t understand you... when they see how powerful you are... your friends will fear you... they will not trust you... when they see you can’t be the Jedi they want you to be... they will abandon you... the voice reminded her.

Her eyes snapped to his as darkness surged through her veins. “The old Rey... that you knew for, what, a day before I went to train with Luke?” she replied spitefully. Part of her knew it was the darkness talking, that he was just drunk, that she should walk away before she said something she regretted to him as well. But the darkness spurred her on.

“Maybe this is Rey. Or maybe I’m tired of everyone looking to me to be someone I’m not. I’ve never had to rely on anyone, and I’ve never had anyone rely on me. And I liked it that way! I understand we all have responsibilities, but because I am the only Force user here – something I only realized I had a few weeks ago – I have been pushed into the center of this war that I never wanted to be a part of, to begin with. Now I’m stuck training myself, because the only Jedi left refused, even though he was the uncle of my bitter enemy and the one who pushed him to the dark side in the first place. And now I have no one to help me. All I have to learn from now – to be this heroic Jedi you all think I am – is Luke’s Jedi texts. What if I don’t want to be what everyone expects me to be? I have no way to read them, no way to train, no way to learn if this is even something I believe in. So I’m sorry if I don’t smile enough for you, Finn.”

Finn looked properly chastened, even in his drunken state. “Rey, I’m sorr–”

“You could always ask Kylo Ren for help,” Poe suggested dryly. The entire table grew quiet as if the thought was on all their minds. Was that it? Was that why she felt like an outsider? They were all thinking the same thing; they didn’t trust her either. They feared her power. No one else would give voice to what Poe was bold enough – or his lips loose enough from intoxication – to say. Their silence in defending her, however, was telling. Rey stood up from her seat in a fury, slamming the
book on the table. “No, don’t bother. I’ll go,” he sneered, “I’ve got a holocall to Nakadia to make.” He grabbed his drink from the table, abandoning his food, and walked away with Beebee-Ate in tow. Rey continued hurriedly collecting her things.

“You don’t have to go, Rey,” Finn said softly, placing his hand over her things.

This was her chance. Hadn’t she been looking for a reason to leave all along? “I do; I can’t be around that stuff,” she said, gesturing to the alcohol. “It reminds me too much that my parents sold me for drinking money.”

She could see the pity in their eyes, and it only added fuel to her anger. They didn’t understand. If they said anything else, she ignored them as she gathered her things. She didn’t want to hear their apologies or empty platitudes. She didn’t want to be told about how it had made her into this delusion of a Jedi they all believed in. There was no point trying to explain anything to them. They wouldn’t believe her, because they didn’t trust her. Poe was lying to them all; why couldn’t they see it? Why didn’t they care about that? He was the one who shouldn’t be trusted. And she wouldn’t let it go. He would pay for what he was doing to the Resistance.

Maybe she would go to Leia and explain what she’d overheard. That would require not doing everything in her power to avoid Leia – which she had done since she asked the woman if Kylo was alive. She knew Leia suspected something. Worse, ever since the night when he walked into her room as she whispered Kylo’s name, Poe suspected something. What he suspected, she wasn’t certain, but he wasn’t stupid. If she revealed her suspicions about Poe, would he reveal his about her and Kylo?

A small shift of energy interrupted her thoughts. She stilled, her hand hovering over her book. “I can feel him.”

“Rey?” Rose asked hesitantly.

“I can feel him again,” she whispered, so quietly it was barely audible. “I have to go.” She moved in a daze, absently gathering the remainder of her belongings and wandering back toward her temple room without another word to her friends.

“Finn, what just happened between Rey and Poe? What is all of this about Kylo Ren?” Rose said in a baffled, hushed tone. Finn knew that he needed help. Despite her assertions, Rey was changing, for the worse. He had no doubt who was doing it to her. She wanted time to gain control over the bond, but, clearly, the bond was gaining control over her. The only thing standing in his way was her trust in him. He stood there – at war with himself – as Rose waited patiently for him to reveal
what she was already suspected.

He ran his hand down his face as his shoulders slumped in defeat. “Promise to tell no one?”

“Of course.”

The words cascaded from his mouth in quick, nervous succession. “Then you’re stronger than I am,” he said. “Poe thinks something happened between Rey and the Supreme Leader, which sounds crazy because it’s Rey, but he’s right. Rey has a Force Bond with Kylo Ren.”

“She has a what?” Rose shouted, drawing the attention of the others. She waited for them to go back to their conversations before repeating her question. “She has a what?”

Finn refused to look at her as he continued. He pushed the food around on the tray in front of him, agitated that he had to speak the treacherous words aloud. “A bond. I don’t know much about the Force, but I saw Kylo Ren in her room even though he was physically across the galaxy. They can talk to each other like they’re in the same room. I guess it’s like a holocall, except they can… touch each other. She could kill him. She swore me to secrecy, but it has been long enough; I think she’s losing control.”

Rose was more confused than angry. The First Order had turned everyone in their mining colony into slaves, eventually killing her family and friends. She had joined the Resistance to fight them, and they had eventually killed her sister. Kylo Ren had almost killed the man she loved and the rest of her family at the Resistance. She had plenty of reasons to hate him and anyone connected to him, but her chest immediately ached in sympathy for her friend. A bond sounded serious. She couldn’t imagine a worse torture than having to be in the same room as her enemy.

“That’s terrible,” Rose whispered. “Poor Rey. No wonder she’s so stressed.”

“She was on the Supremacy with us, trying to turn him. She said he killed Snoke for her, to manipulate her to the dark side. Poe thinks there is more there than Rey is telling us. He thinks she enjoys his company and that he’s trying to turn her against us.”

Rose gasped. “She was on the Supremacy?”

“With him,” he sneered. “She willingly went to him, Rosie. After everything he did! Maybe…”
he is manipulating her. She seems like she’s hiding something. Whoever she’s been thinking about since the other night, she doesn’t hate him, that’s for sure.”

“No, no, no, I think you’ve got it all wrong,” she insisted. “Okay, I don’t want to betray her trust, but the alternative seems worse. Here it goes. She has very strong feelings for a different guy, someone she met in the Force. I can’t tell you whom, but he is most definitely not Kylo Ren. She had a fight with him the other night, and that was why she was so upset. I think that is what she has been hiding.”

Hope bloomed in his eyes again. “You’re sure?”

“Yes!” Rose assured him. “I know his name. He has ties to the Resistance, that’s all I can say. This bond might play a part in her stress, but I think most of her sadness is about him. As far as I know, he left and hasn’t come back.”

“They got in a fight?” His eyes darkened, his tone was protective. “Did he hurt her?”

“No, I think she hurt him,” Rose said carefully. “Their relationship is... complicated. I think she is afraid of the obviously strong feelings she has for him and has been pushing him away.”

“Thank you!” He swept Rose into his arms. “I mean, I still have to threaten her boyfriend with death to make sure he never hurts her, but I thought... this is... this is such a relief.” He kissed Rose’s forehead in relief, and she softened into his strong embrace. She wondered if Ben Solo knew about Rey’s bond with Kylo Ren. Leia’s son was the only other Force-user she was aware of, could he be the key to helping Rey?

Rose considered talking to Leia, asking her about her son. She wouldn’t betray Rey, but she could ask if anyone else on the base was in contact with him. Rose could contact him through a holocall to understand where Ben Solo stood when it came to Rey. Perhaps she could convince him to return to help her friend. If Rey had a bond with the enemy in the Force, she needed help, and he could be the only one strong enough in the Force to help her. If he loved her, she knew he would return to the Resistance to protect her.
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Rey stumbled into her temple room, dropping most of her belongings directly inside the threshold. She felt as if a tension, like a breath she had never exhaled, was finally released when she had physical proof of her bondmate being alive. *Ben is okay. He really is okay.* She clutched Luke’s text to her chest, collapsing onto the stone slab that was her bed. With a sigh, she dropped her head and released the tears she was withholding.

Much to her dismay, but not to her surprise, the Force chose that vulnerable moment to connect her to the man on her mind. The buzzing in her ears faded as a solid form materialized beside her on the bed. She desperately tried to dry her eyes with the heels of her hands, but the tears were unrelenting. Her attempts to suppress her tears only proved to further deteriorate her state into hiccuppying sobs. She was too weary to scramble away from his warmth, too exhausted to fight. She placed her face in her hands in shame, waiting for his cruel comments. She was at her weakest; he could have broken her down. If their positions were reversed, she would have seized the opportunity.

He did not utter any of the cruel words she knew he was capable of. He recognized her vulnerability and *stayed* with her in silent support. Rey found herself inconsolable in her sobbing, because, in that moment, he was exactly what she needed him to be. This was the man from the hut, the man she wished he could be.

*I’m sorry I’m here. Just pretend I’m someone else, someone who could actually bring you comfort,* his strained, deep voice echoed in her mind.

At his miserable words, she found herself leaning against him, crying into the dark, thick material on his arm. He tensed at the contact but didn’t pull away. Rey didn’t know how long he sat there with her. It could have been two minutes, two hours, two days... stars could have been born and died and their energy reborn in the time she spent lost in his comforting warmth.

His presence, not any of the other people who wanted her to let them in, was what she needed in that moment. It terrified her, because she knew without warning he would be snapped back across the galaxy, too soon. The only residual testament to the events that unfolded between them would be a phantom sensation where his touch had been. Later, when she sat alone in her cold, lonely room, she knew their time together would seem like merely a flicker of a flame in the expanse of their existence. Would its significance be as inconsequential as well? Maybe it would be for him, but she felt more alive in one innocent touch of their fingers on Ahch-To than she had her entire life.
on Jakku. She could tell herself later it meant nothing, and perhaps she would to assuage her guilt, but as she did, she would know it was a lie.

Eventually, the sobs faded, the tears dried, and the only sound was the quiet inhale and exhale of their slow, deep breaths. The warmth she felt was not the pooling heat that she had felt recently at his touch. This was a beaming inside her, like sunlight within. The irony was not lost on her that Kylo Ren, Supreme Leader, master of the Knights of Ren, was – in that moment – offering her only his sympathy and companionship; no manipulation, deceit or malice. Just... Ben. The ever-changing vacillation between this man and the one who broke her heart was draining and confusing. But sitting there with him felt right after days of worry.

“Who hurt you?” His voice was gruff with sleep or disuse. It startled her; his baritone voice rumbling through their converged bodies just as her eyelids began to flutter with the heaviness of sleep.

“Why?” she quipped half-heartedly. “Would you kill him?”

“Would you want me to?” His voice was tinged with cynicism as he dropped his head to study his hands.

Rey knew she should separate herself from him; they were enemies after all, but he was warm and smelled like thermite, and she decided she had a newfound love for that smell. He was safe. She wasn't going to consider too deeply why that mattered to her. “No, Ben,” she sighed “But since when do you care what I want?” He hummed, and she had the distinct feeling she was wrong, that he cared to know exactly what she thought. When she realized he had no intention of answering, she continued. “If I wanted him dead, I’d kill him myself.”

“Of that... I have no doubt,” he replied in amusement, shaking his head as he huffed a near chuckle.

She had to stifle her own grin. “Is that almost... humor, Ben?”

“Perhaps.”

She wanted to turn and search his face, see the softness in his features that she knew would be there, but the peace between them was fragile. She didn’t want to break it. “That is the least brooding tone I have ever heard you use.”
He snorted softly in response. “I doubt I sounded brooding when I told you how beautiful you are.”

Those words did something funny to her insides. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t swallow, couldn’t blink for a moment, as if she were a malfunctioning droid, but there was a fluttering inside her like dozens of winged beasts attempting to escape. It was both grounding and destabilizing.

*You remember that.*

There was not a single chance she would ever say those words aloud or acknowledge his statement, for that matter. Their bond was generally a sparking tangle of fervent energy between them. Whether positive or negative, the comforting consistency was the intensity. Something had changed. In that moment, their words were irrelevant. The bond hummed with a content and relaxed familiarity – a recognition of naked honesty and empathetic understanding. It felt domestic and intimate. It terrified her because it felt right to be there with him, as she questioned her place at the Resistance. Speaking of the Resistance...

“Ben, would the Resistance have any reason to form an alliance with the Hutts?” She hoped he would let their earlier conversation die. He had never been one to do that, and he had zero reason to ignore her attempt at avoidance, but she hoped he would allow her to exchange that vulnerability for another.

He did.

His head lifted from where it had been bowed, and she knew he was studying her. She could feel the heat of his stare. “Why?”

Rey couldn’t see the expression on his face, but she could imagine the confusion based on the higher tone of his voice. “That's what I'm asking you. Hypothetically, if the Resistance formed an alliance with them, why would they?”

Kylo was quiet for a moment, thoroughly considering her question. For the first time, Rey appreciated that about him; he was ever the student, always thinking, analyzing and challenging her viewpoint. If he wasn’t focused on galactic domination, she would have appreciated it more. To ignore the brief reminder of who exactly he had chosen to be, she burrowed into his warmth further. After a moment, Kylo spoke, “Because they already have before.” She couldn’t discern whether he sounded amused or bitter. Maybe both.
It was her turn to navigate her confusion. “When? Why?”

“Your… pilot.” It took everything in her not to turn to him when she heard the resentment bleed into his words, “Under the orders of the general, he assisted Grakkus the Hutt in escaping from the prison Megalox Beta in exchange for information on Lor San Tekka's location, inevitably leading them to Tuanul where I intercepted them…and you know the rest of the story.”

_No, he’s wrong. Why would they make a deal with a criminal? With a Hutt? “Why was Grakkus at the prison?”_

“He'd been there for decades,” he said. “I never had reason to know much about him; I was busy conquering worlds for my… for Snoke in the Unknown Regions. I only know that Snoke sought to find him first. I've heard Grakkus was obsessed with the Jedi. All Hutts hated them, yet he collected Jedi artifacts and holocrons. But why was he imprisoned? He's a crime lord, so take your pick – slavery, kidnapping, trafficking, extortion, murder… it could be for kidnapping and auctioning a Jedi padawan. Snoke insisted it was for imprisoning and forcing Luke Skywalker to fight in his personal arena. Apparently watching slaves and prisoners fight to the death was one of his favorite past times.”

“And Leia, the Resistance, know what he's done? To her own brother?” It made no sense. Why would she help the creature that nearly killed her brother escape imprisonment… so she could find her brother? If he had the location to the man with the map, once he escaped he could have found Luke first, or sold his location to Snoke. Why would they do something so… wrong?

There was something unreadable in Kylo's words, something that scared her. “That's a question for your general, isn't it?”

Leia was not only her general but _his_ mother. He had left his family behind, but did he honestly think so little of them? Did his resentment toward them cloud his thoughts? “What do you think, Ben?”

“I think the general knows exactly what that creature has done,” he said. “It’s war. Desperate times, Rey…” There was no hiding the satisfaction in his voice. _Why?_

“She couldn't...”
He was quiet, but it wasn’t contemplative. She could feel his eagerness in the bond. He was waiting. She had revealed consequential secrets about the Resistance, or at least, she thought she had. Yet he had adopted that master and apprentice tone again; he had given her the relevant information, and now he wanted her to come to the same conclusion on her own. He was perfectly content with not discovering anything else, such as why she was asking about an alliance with the Hutts, even if it would benefit the First Order. There was no deception over the bond, he believed the truth that was settling in her gut. The truth that sounded too impossible to be truth at all. She had heard the stories of what the Hutts had done to his family. Leia couldn't have known, or she wouldn't have ordered that Hutt's release. Kylo had to be wrong, even though her intuition told her he wasn’t.

All she could think to say was, “Why?” It was rhetorical. She knew why, but she didn’t want to know.

“Is this Hutt issue what's bothering you?” he said, after a moment of silence. “Is that why your energy feels so... coarse?”

“Coarse?”

“In the Force,” he clarified. “Your energy usually feels like a windstorm or a hurricane, strong and powerful, but smooth. Now, though, you feel denser, abrasive and coarse, like rocks or –”

“Sand?” she finished for him. Begrudgingly, she supposed it fit. She wondered if he knew what he felt like in the Force, because he was no picnic, either. Luke was cold but steady, like a river. Leia was warm and bright like a star. Kylo's energy was intense, often overwhelming. It was a raging storm that warred between a burning fire and sharp, cold ice. It was unwelcoming, to say the least. She presumed sand didn't feel too welcoming, either. “No, that wasn’t what hurt me.”

His voice deepened, his tone threatening. “Who hurt you?”

“Do you truly want to know?” she asked, trying to avoid any lingering thoughts on why she felt compelled to tell him.

“Yes.”

“You,” she whispered. “I thought you were dead. There was the explosion...and then I couldn’t feel you anymore.”
He was quiet for a moment. She expected "why do you care" or something equally contentious. "Rey, as anyone who has tried to kill me will tell you – which is admittedly the majority of the people either you or I know – I am nearly impossible to kill. I’ve been cheating death my entire life. Or fighting it. Fate has favored me in that respect. I inherited that trait from my fath...” He released a slow breath, and she could almost feel the remorse he was hiding from her. He was quiet, reflective for a moment before continuing. “They’ve been trying to kill me since I was two years old, but I even survived then. If I can escape the wrath of both of my masters and the most powerful woman in the galaxy, then I can handle a poor attempt at sabotage by my own men.”

“Sabotage?” His answer intensified a fear she hadn't realized was growing in the pit of her stomach. “Why would your own men want to kill you, Ben?”

“Power, Rey,” his voice was low but gentle. He spoke as if it were obvious. Simple. “The ambition for more power. That is all war is, no matter what side you’re on. A fight over power. I have it, and they want it. Simple as that.”

*For the First Order, just add in evil and greed.*

“Simple as that?” she asked, his perverse view of the galaxy immediately vexing her. “They want to kill you for power. Is that why you killed Snoke and wanted me to join you? The ambition for more power?”

He breathed heatedly through his nose, but his voice was little more than a murmur. “You know that was different.”

“Do I?”

“Well, it was,” he said. He was tense against her, and she decided to let it go to avoid another fight.

When she spoke again, her voice was soft. “Are you still in danger?”

He sighed, dropping his head. “Always.” She was uncertain what she had expected as a response, only that it hadn’t been that. “I knew how this would inevitably end when I took the throne.”
A chasm of silence grew between them. Rey realized she had not once glanced at his face as they sat there, her body wilted into his side. He easily supported her weight with his large frame, his elbows braced by his knees, his gloved hands clenching and unclenching in front of him. She could feel the muscles of his arms tense under the movement, the heat radiating off his body, and it struck her how real he felt. She wondered if she felt the same to him. If he was uncomfortable with their proximity, he disguised it well. They both stared forward, as if they were not enemies as long as they never made eye contact. Perhaps it was her exhaustion, the late hour, or that he wasn’t looking at her, but she found herself saying things she knew she shouldn’t.

“I’m alone here.”

He was quiet for a moment. For once, he was uncertain how to respond. “Where is your family?” She could hear the bitterness in his tone; she could feel the resentment over the bond. Rey huffed humorlessly. “Drinking.”

“Then why are you here with me?” he asked, but she knew there was more to what he was asking. Why are you not with them? Why are you not celebrating? Why are you telling me this? Why haven’t you left? Rey chose to answer the simplest form of his question.

“I don’t drink,” she said softly. Kylo didn’t ask her why, he didn’t whisper useless platitudes, he didn’t tell her he was sorry. There was no pity trickling through the bond, only understanding.

“Neither do I.”

Kylo hadn’t asked her why, and she wanted to give him the same courtesy, but after everything he had done, she couldn’t understand it. “Why not?”

Rey didn’t expect him to answer. It would have been easier for him to deflect or counter-question, especially when the answer could have left him vulnerable. She knew Kylo rarely allowed himself to be vulnerable; he had no reason to be with her. “The same reason I didn’t allow you to inject that stim-shot,” he said. “I don’t trust it.” Kylo knew Concordia was a sensitive subject for her, but that was something she appreciated about him; though he gained control over conversations, he never tip-toed around difficult subjects. He was honest, even when it angered her. She didn’t have any desire to be angry with him this time. In fact, she found herself battling a giggle bubbling in her throat. Rey couldn’t help the humor that tinted her words.
“What worse could you possibly do drunk?”

When he answered, she regretted them – her insensitive words – but he didn’t punish her for them, at least not directly. “It’s not what I would do,” he said, “it’s what everyone else would. I can never let my guard down. I can never show weakness. That’s when they’ll strike.”

Rey swallowed her shame. The darkness implored her entry, but she found herself pushing it away. The darkness helped soothe the pain of heartache and loneliness, but she felt no need for it as she curled into his warmth. After spending days fearing his death, only his presence could soothe her. With the absence of darkness, she allowed herself to view him through the lens of compassion. “What about friends?”

It was his turn to huff humorlessly. “What friends?” he asked, and his voice was sincere. “I’m alone.” Her heart yearned to remind him of what she had promised in the hut, but it was a lie, wasn’t it? They were both alone. Kylo continued to make certain of that by remaining with the First Order. “It’s probably better this way; at least I won’t be betrayed.”

“Yes, of course you will,” she nearly laughed at the preposterousness of his statement, “you’re surrounded by enemies!”

“No, Rey, your enemies are exactly what you expect them to be. I expect them to kill me; there’s not a soul here who could betray me,” he answered through clenched teeth. “That’s the worst part of betrayal. There has to be a level of trust or loyalty to be betrayed.”

“But you said I betrayed you.”

“I know,” he murmured. “That’s why it’s better this way.”

She knew what his words meant – it was better that they were alone, even though he promised they wouldn’t be. The weight of that moment grew in the chasm between them. “Everyone in my life has disappointed me, Ben. You told me I wasn’t alone, but we are. Why did you have to disappoint me, too?”

Kylo was quiet for a long moment, so long she believed he wouldn’t answer her. Finally, with a long-suffering sigh, he said, “You think you’d be different than anyone else? All I’ve ever been was a disappointment.”
Rey knew to whom he was referring. “That’s not true; they love you.”

“They didn’t,” he spat, the anger that had been missing through their entire conversation now evident. Of course, his breaking point was his family. “They didn’t care about me; they feared me. So I became someone worth fearing. *Now* they care.”

It was a loaded statement, packed with more than Rey could unravel in that moment. AT first, she assumed he was talking about Luke and what happened that night at the temple. It was true, Luke had feared what he had seen in Kylo, though Kylo had yet to make the wrong choice. She understood that part; becoming what everyone feared him to be. Those fears mirrored her own. But what didn’t make sense was that he had said "they." He meant more than Luke. Was there more to the fall of Ben Solo than the night at the temple? She refused to ask, she didn’t want him to leave. It hurt to admit to herself how profoundly she yearned for him to stay.

As the silence stretched on, she absently traced her fingers over the symbols on the cover of the Jedi text in her lap. The sharp blade of Kylo’s words were the first to cut through the heavy silence.

“The Rammahgon?”

“*I’m sorry?*” she asked in confusion. Without turning, he rapped his knuckles on the text in her hands.

“That is ‘The Rammahgon’ - a gift from Luke, I presume?” She sensed the strained resentment in his voice at the mention of his uncle.

“No, not a gift. I stole it,” she corrected casually. Kylo made a choking sound that thrust him into a coughing attack. She let out a mocking snort of at his dramatic display.

“You stole it. You...”

“Scavenger?” she finished for him.

He sighed at her retort. “Not quite my line of thinking.”
“Yes, I stole it. Right after I fought Luke, ignored his warning about you, and left him on that island to go bring you home.” She wished in that moment she could have studied his face. There was confusion, surprise, and incredulity bouncing through the bond – all emotions she had expected. But also pride... and reverence.

His voice was ethereal in wonder; he sounded… younger. “You fought Luke?”

She recalled her duel in the rain when Luke had told her to leave and she had refused to accept that he was not the hero she believed he was. She had eventually accepted the truth, or perhaps she learned that when people become legends, their inevitable humanity would always be disappointing. Luke was the hero they all needed in the end, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t flawed. She wasn’t sorry about how she left him, especially when it was in defense of the man sitting next to her. “Well, he deserved it.”

“Spoken like a true Jedi.” His voice wavered in an obvious attempt to suppress his antipathy for his uncle’s beliefs.

“Some Jedi I am,” she sighed. “I can’t even read it.” He tensed under the understanding – there was another unwanted, lonely, castaway – desperate for belonging – whom Luke had failed. She was regretfully forced to sit up when he twisted his body to face her. She expected a mocking or derisive expression, she had chosen Luke over him as a teacher, after all, but his eyes were pained.

“Luke never taught you?” he whispered ruefully. *Even, the lost boy, fallen Jedi, who was let down the most by Luke, expected better of him.* That realization sparked fury that tensed across her shoulders, her fingers curling in upon themselves.

“No,” she tried to contain the resentment in her voice. “I don't even know what they stand for. How can I be the Jedi the Resistance needs when I don't even know the Jedi Code?”

She expected him to explain to her every reason why she couldn’t be the Jedi the Resistance needed, and perhaps he did in his way, but she didn’t expect him to answer her. “There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is the Force.” The words flowed from his lips with a robotic familiarity that shouldn’t have surprised her. “That is the Jedi Mantra.”

*And they wondered why they failed,* his voice whispered across the bond.
Rey was well-aware of the dark and twisted morals that Kylo followed. Logically, Rey knew he had studied under his uncle, obviously he would have learned from him. Still, there was something disquieting that the "Son of Darkness" knew more about the Jedi than she did. Her skin began to prickle with fear... and resentment toward the man who was supposed to have guided her. This man – this morally corrupt man of darkness – had given her more insight into the Jedi mentality than the Last Jedi. If Luke wanted her to believe the Jedi religion needed to die, he should have just led with that. “But none of that is true! How am I supposed to suppress my emotions? How am I not supposed to feel fear or anger or passion, everything that makes me human?”

“Why do you think I am not a Jedi?” he asked quietly. “They forbade all emotion, not just fear and anger, but love and attachment as well. You are supposed to be a vessel of the Force, only intended to serve the galaxy.”

The meaning of Luke’s final lesson fell like a weight in her stomach. It wasn’t some cruel joke he had played; he was trying to teach her something. The Jedi were formed on ancient beliefs, and though they fought for the good in the galaxy, that didn’t necessarily mean that they were successful. In a scenario where they had to account for the good of the many versus the good of the few, the very scenario Luke laid out for her was a likely result. Helping those villagers wouldn’t have been for the greater good, but occasionally decisions can’t be made for the greater good, occasionally they are made because it’s the right thing to do.

There was a reason they were born with emotion. If she hadn’t been, she would have killed Kylo. Without emotion, people like Kylo – or his grandfather – would stay lost, because the galaxy at large would benefit more from his death. The Jedi would have always failed him – and Luke and his grandfather. The worst part was, if the Jedi were forced to subjugate emotion, then there was never hope for someone like her. Maybe she could help him because she didn't abide by their code. Maybe there was hope – not for the Jedi, but for her – and that was what Luke was trying to show her. She didn’t need an ancient religion. “Maybe that was why Luke said the Jedi Order must die.”

It was a moment of clarity she hadn’t felt in weeks. There was nothing clouding her thoughts, no whispers, no darkness. She felt peaceful. Kylo was quiet for a moment, ruminating on the new information that clearly surprised him. “I suppose it is inevitable that he and I agree would agree on something.” The words themselves sounded sarcastic, but there was a softness to his voice, a tone she had never heard from him when he spoke about his family. Maybe it was an absence of something. Her intuition told her, however, that whatever it was, it was something he needed to work through alone. Whatever was occurring behind those haunted eyes was far more important than anything she could say aloud.

“What does your Sith Code mantra say?” she asked carefully, knowing that their conflicting viewpoints was a fuse for them both. She hated his ideals, but in that moment, she wanted to understand him. If she could see why he was holding onto the darkness, maybe she could find the key to helping him let it go.
He shook his head with a huff. “Peace is a lie. There is only passion. Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, I gain power. Through power, I gain victory. Through victory, my chains are broken. The Force shall free me,” he recalled from memory. “It’s not my code though. I don’t completely disagree with their mantra – it makes more sense than the Jedi Code – but I am no **Sith**.”

“But you use the dark side of the Force...”.

“I hate them both. Jedi ignore and stifle their emotions; Sith use them as weapons. I may use the darkness, but that doesn’t mean I align myself with them. There were many who accessed the darkness in the Force who were not Sith. Snoke was not Sith – at least he wasn’t when he instructed me. There were Dark Jedi, who were either fallen –like myself – or rogue. Or there was Revan, who could access both the darkness and the light,” he answered. “I can use both to an extent, as can you.”

Balance. Luke had talked of balance. She had thought he meant that for someone lost in darkness like Kylo, the Force would create someone strong in the light like Rey who could destroy him. What if there could have been another type of balance? “So... if we’re the last Force-users left, then there are no light side or dark side users? There is no light or darkness. There is just the Force.”

“We are not the last; there are other Force-sensitives out there, just not Jedi or Sith. Even if we were the last, or the strongest, there may not be light or dark side users, but that’s different than the light or dark of the Force. There were many before us that believed that there is no darkness or light, only users who manipulate it differently. But, having used both, it's not true. You don’t have to align with the dark side to manipulate the darkness. I know you’ve felt it. Darkness is more powerful, but it has consequences. I heard it described once as ‘the light is a stream, the dark roaring rapids, but beware, wide is the gate that leads into temptation.’”

“Is it truly good versus evil?”

Kylo, who she swore inherited his propensity for not directly answering questions from his uncle, asked her a question instead. “What do you feel when you use them?”

She closed her eyes, allowing the Force to flow through her as it had on Ahch-To. “The light is comforting, smooth, and healing. It is warmth and life. Like love. It’s calm, like sleep. When I use the light, it feels constant, even and endless,” she smiled, but it faded as she found its opposite in the Force. “And the dark is powerful, strong, and destructive. It brings change and death. It is cold, but burning like passion too. It is chaotic like emotions. The dark comes to me in powerful bursts. It’s strengthening for a little while, yet exhausting in the long run...” It had only been a few minutes since she had pushed away the darkness, but her mind craved the peace of the cold, soothing flow.
When she opened her eyes, there was something new in his eyes. Not hope, at least not yet, but it was bright and fervent. He was pleased with her understanding. “Exactly, it is more than good or evil. There is a definite place for both, there is a call to both inside us, just as there is a place for love or passion.”

“Balance,” she said, trying to wrap her mind around Luke’s lesson. Something inside was calling to her, pleading with her to understand the implications of that one simple word.

With that word, however, Kylo’s enthusiasm faded. “There have been some who have found a balance with both. I, however, am not one of them. Not that I was given much of a choice. Luke asked me to forsake my darkness. I couldn’t find balance in the light, there was always darkness.”

”And Snoke asked you to forsake the light,” she reminded him. “You thought you had to sacrifice the light to find darkness instead. That’s the conflict inside of you now.” It struck her then, how lost they both were without a teacher. Certainly, Kylo was better off without that creature standing over him, manipulating him and spinning his evil lies, but he would have benefitted from someone like Luke to explain the Force to him, too. She wondered when she would see Luke again, and if he would ever show himself to his nephew. Kylo may have known more than her, but he needed to see the truth, too.

The truth – the Force was breathtakingly complex, more than she ever realized, and it was impossible as she stood before its vastness to understand what the truth was. “I thought I understood the Force, but I was wrong,” she sighed. The darkness fed on her doubt, hiding away the momentous realization that was just within her grasp. Her thoughts of the Jedi, Luke’s final lesson, and balance faded away to the insecurities that the darkness had found.

“No one understands the Force,” he assured her.

“Well, hopefully, the Force does.”

He hummed. “That depends on if you see events as consequences of choices and luck, or as a predetermined destiny. If there is destiny, then there must be some reason for… all of this.”

“I can't find my place in all of this. I thought Luke could show me, but do you want to know what happened when I found him?” she said, less angry as she understood his intentions better now, but frustrated all the same. “He refused to teach me. He didn’t want anything to do with the war or his family and friends. He blamed your fall on his ‘hubris and failure as a master’ and believed the Jedi
should die with him. When he did teach me, it was with the intention to prove that belief. At the
time, it seemed like he didn’t teach me anything at all. He did teach me about balance in the Force,
but then he lied to me about what happened to you at his temple. He tricked me into believing the
caretakers of the island were under attack, but I think I better understand the failures of the Jedi
Order now. I asked him to be the last hope of the Resistance, and he refused, so I left to find you.”

“Luke was a hero in the end. He gave his life to save us, he taught me the lessons I needed to
understand the Jedi, but not the ones to become one. I had no choice but to steal these books and
hope one day I could read them. If he refused to teach me, then I was just going to teach myself, as
I’ve done my entire life. I asked for help from Threepio, but he’s been busy helping Leia, and what
he did decipher for me made no sense. Luke returned, and I thought he would help me, but I
haven’t seen him after that first time. I don’t know if I’ll ever see him again. And you can see how
well it’s going with teaching myself. The entire Resistance is counting on me as their hope; they
want me to be another Luke, but I’m no closer to reading it than I was when I first took it.” She
closed her eyes, angry at Luke for not helping her, at Kylo for not being the one who could teach
her, and at herself for having hope.

Kylo’s low timber broke the silence of the room. “Do you want to?”

“Do I want to what?” she sighed. “Be a Jedi?”

“No, I know you want that.”

She bit back the tears that threatened to fall, the darkness feasting hungrily on her insecurities. “I
don’t know anymore.”

“You wouldn’t be afraid to fail if you didn’t,” he said. “What I meant was – do you want to have
the ability to read it?”

Her eyes fluttered open at his words, sensing his sympathetic tone. His eyes, always honest,
revealed the unequivocal sincerity of his question, but all it did was remind her of when he had
tried to manipulate her on Starkiller into becoming his student of darkness.

You need a teacher.

“You think I need you to teach me?” It was almost instinct, how she reacted. She didn’t intend for
the darkness-tainted agitation to bleed through into her voice, though she was keenly aware that he
noticed. Part of her knew she wasn’t angry at him for offering as much as she was angry at herself for needing it.

“No, but what other choice do you have?” he said, his intense eyes studying hers to gauge her reaction. “I’m not trying to turn you, and this has no benefit for me. I know you’ll use what you learn against me, to help him destroy me; I don’t care anymore.” Rey knew to which “him” he was referring, but she didn’t understand why. They had talked about the kiss; it meant nothing. Why wouldn’t he let it go? He reached his hand toward her face, the same way he knocked her unconscious in the forest on Takodana, and she recoiled instinctively.

“I’m trying to help you!” he barked, and she glared at him, condemning him in his outburst. She expected him to throw something and leave again, but he matched her glare instead. He was physically shaking in his anger, the muscles in his jaw jumping as he clenched his teeth, a storm of emotions raging in his eyes. They stared at each other in silence; daring the other to break it. She watched as the fire in his eyes slowly faded into embers. They both seemed surprised that he had calmed himself without any further outbursts. After a moment he exhaled sharply, sweeping hair from his forehead. “Trust me, please.”

She shook her head. “No, not as long as you fight for the First Order.”

He turned away in frustration, and she waited quietly for his reaction. When it became clear he had no intention of arguing with her, she took the chance to study his profile. His long, dark hair cast shadows on his face as he hung his head, his lips pursed as he was lost to his own thoughts. Everything about him in that moment was endearing, and she loathed it. She had fallen victim to his charms before. He was interesting to study and understand, but that didn’t change who he had proven repeatedly that he had become. She wanted to hate him for what he had done to her. She didn’t, but she could pretend. Though it was easier to pretend to hate him when he wasn’t in the same room as her. The second they were together, she felt drawn to him again like gravity. She had never felt so drawn and repelled by the same person.

“How do you think you have suddenly developed your new Force skills and abilities?” It was a simple question. It should have a simple explanation, yet before she even answered, she knew that what she had previously believed was incorrect.

“The Force?” He shook his head, his eyes knowing. A grin twitched on the corner of his mouth, as if they were playing a game of Dejarik, and he had strategized the winning move.

“Our bond,” his deep voice murmured.
No.

She would have known, she decided. She would have never taken anything that was used in darkness. Either her revulsion to the idea was evident on her face, or he had heard her, because his eyes sparked with a burning vehement fire, penetrating through her denial. “The Mind Trick in the interrogation room? The lightsaber skills on Starkiller? The rocks on Crait? I felt you accessing my memories, my skills, my training, but what I didn’t know at first was you were using the bond. Our bond.”

What is the Force if it is not providing these abilities?

A shiver trembled through her. Everything she had believed, everything she thought she had understood about the Force. It was as if the world had turned on its axis, and nothing made sense anymore. Except… it did make sense; how she “knew” to use the Force to escape, how she was suddenly able to turn the fight against him. It was why Luke had been so distant after watching her practice with the lightsaber, because she knew forms that she had never been taught. Having trained her bondmate, his fears likely stemmed from a recognition of a familiar fighting style as well. “All of it. I learned it all from you?”

“Yes.”

Everything she knew, she learned from a man drowning in darkness. Could she trust it? Was he slowly changing her, molding her after his own image? She had become someone she didn’t recognize; hateful, angry, cold. Was he to blame for this darkness she felt around her? The bond? She was overwhelmed by her own shackling fear. Another thought, a less terrifying thought slithered through the darkness of her mind. If she had accessed the other skills, then she could access all of it. She could be as powerful as him in the Force – more powerful, because she understood the darkness. “And I can just... steal all these skills from you? Any that I want?” She bit her lip to suppress a grin. Her mind swarmed with all the possibilities of having his knowledge at her fingertips. The power.

“It’s not stealing as much as downloading, because I don’t lose the skills you take from me. I can teach you, as I’d prefer you not use our bond or the Force that way,” he replied warily, “but I’m offering this one.”

It was a startling realization. If he wanted to teach her, why wouldn’t he give her access to everything he knew? Who was he protecting? Her? Or himself? What she did know was she needed this skill.
“How do I do it?”

He cocked his head slightly, his voice warm with curiosity. “How did you do it before?”

She shrugged. “I just searched for the knowledge in the Force.” Ever the student, his eyes lost focus for a moment, his brows drawn in thought. His stare centered slightly over her shoulder as he contemplated the mechanics of their Force Bond. He pressed his lips together absently as he thought, and Rey found her eyes flickering to them.

When he was awake, his lips were as expressive as his eyes. Drawn into a soft pout, they were at odds with everything harsh about him. She felt that strange pulsing inside her again, this ache that she knew could be fulfilled if she just touched her lips to his. If she hadn’t witnessed the act at the outpost on Niima, she would have found the desire absurd. It still seemed mildly nonsensical, considering her kiss with Poe had felt like, well, she supposed touching two lips together would feel like. She had felt more when she had touched Kylo’s hands in the hut. She laid awake at night remembering that tingling heat.

Perhaps it was that experience that afforded her the certainty that whatever made kissing enjoyable, she would feel it all if she made the choice to kiss him. Unfortunately, it was a choice she couldn’t allow herself to make. Not when he’s so… lost. The shiver down her spine brought her back to her senses. Her eyes snapped hastily back to his. His head was tilted, his eyes narrowed as he silently watched her. Her cheeks and ears warmed in guilt. She glanced away.

“Can I?” he finally whispered, his gloved hand hovering over hers. She nodded distantly, wide-eyed and flushed. He tenderly grasped her wrist and guided her hand to his temple. “Take it.” She searched his eyes for a moment. What was she supposed to take? What had they been arguing about? She felt positively off-kilter. “Take it,” he directed, his voice as hoarse as she assumed hers would sound. Her eyes fell to the book in her hands, and she remembered.

She closed her eyes and thought of the skill she needed that he possessed, searching the Force until she grasped onto it. His memories of learning the ancient language flashed before her eyes, too quickly to make sense of them. The light of the Force radiated upon her, as it had done before. She reveled in the warmth that surrounded her, feeling at home in a way she never thought possible. A jolt in the Force brought her back to the present. When she opened her eyes, he was gone.

“Ben?” An emptiness ached in her chest as her hand reached out to the empty space that he had occupied. Even when she was her most furious with him, his leaving never became any easier. That hollow yearning – which she first felt when her parents abandoned her – consumed her until she saw him again. She knew he would come back, unlike her parents, but for how long? The explosion reminded her that the man was mortal, and losing him was a real possibility.
Then he will abandon me forever, just like they did.

As her hand fell in acceptance of his disappearance, she glanced down at the text in her lap.

“The Rammahgon,” she read.
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Kylo relaxed at his desk in his quarters, typing up another detailed report on his datapad to send to *Sienar-Jaemus Fleet Systems* for further modifications to his TIE Silencer. The dogfight against the squadron of pirates attempting to commandeer a First Order supply vessel had been a simple and uncomplicated victory. At least, that is what he told his general. His only complaint was the deflector shield generator along with the rest of his defense systems had powered off independently during the mission. It was a curious failure in an otherwise competent system, a failure he did not believe was accidental.

His typing was interrupting by the ding of an incoming encrypted message. It was from a source outside the First Order. It should have been impossible – *anyone* having access to his personal account information. He opened the message to find three words: *why those coordinates?* Growling in irritation, he closed the message and resumed his account of the massive systems failure on his Silencer. His typing became more aggressive and his droid whirred somewhere across the room.

“The distraction was most definitely welcomed.” His resonant voice reverted off the walls of his chambers, dulling the sharp pang of loneliness. The mission had been foolish, but it was better than discovering new methods to isolate himself. It would have been more satisfying, however, without the lecture from his contemptuous general about what were and were not appropriate battles for the Supreme Leader to engage in.

“Hux demands that I sit idle and do nothing. I am the Supreme Leader; I can engage in whatever battle I choose, without insolent remarks from my subordinate.” The disagreement was only settled when he assured Hux that he could assume the throne should the *reigning Supreme Leader be killed in battle*. Hux found the prospect much too enjoyable, in his opinion. Kylo had the Force, but his general was ambitious and conniving. “We are on colliding paths; I can sense it.”

Something had changed while he was gone. He could have attended the battle debriefing following his return, but he hadn’t, because he knew what he did was treason. “What I have done ever since you crashed into my life is against everything I’ve fought for. I am everything I once despised. I don’t know what I am doing anymore.” As he sat in his quarters, confirming his fears about sabotage, he should be attending the Weapons Development meeting with the other top-ranking officials. That was where he was *supposed* to be, but that wasn’t where he wanted to be. He didn’t know where he wanted to be anymore. “All I know is I would rather be right here… with you.”
“I have never been so… lost.” The ambition, the anger, the drive to fight died with Luke. And without that bloodlust, he was beginning to see the First Order in a new light. A different light. He thought he could change it – create a new order, but they contended with him over every change he made. Had their principles truly aligned as he had always assumed? Or did he have such a myopic focus that as long as he was furthering his own personal agenda, he had not hesitated to consider theirs? “Yes, the galaxy needs order. But why does this feel more like chaos?”

The daily briefings had become the largest point of contention, as he found more objections to the ideology of the other officers, and, in return, they struggled to accept his “radical dogma.” He believed Hux viewed the Force as fictional, as his father had. The discourse was fueled by frustration on both sides. They equivocated like senators and belayed his orders in favor of their own initiatives. Every new weapon, every new destroyer was required to be more intimidating... more formidable, but at the cost of practicality. They chose complexity, size, and raw power over capability and efficiency.

“I find myself doubting the intentions of the others.” They convinced him they created the Starkiller base with the purpose of controlling systems, not destroying them. But all they had done was destroy, and he didn’t think they would stop with the Resistance. Starkiller was a formidable grandiosity, and all it required was a couple of explosives and an x-wing to destabilize the core. Then they had created the ability to track ships through hyperspace – no small feat – but still failed to achieve their ultimate goal of capturing the struggling fleet. “They are lost to the same obsessive, power-flaunting stagnation that plagued the Empire. It has become me against them. And they are set on their path to failure.”

“But I have nothing else to fight for. The First Order may be deviating from stability and progress, but the loathsome Resistance is the epitome of chaos. I will never support another Republic. My ambition has not changed, nor have my convictions. And both sides want my head. I am not naïve, I know how this will end. I am living on borrowed time,” he murmured, glancing across the room.

Not that it mattered. He was never meant to survive this. It was only a means to an end. But the motivation – no, the obsession – that had compelled him for so long – the desire to kill his past before it killed him – had faded. He promised himself the pain would end when he fulfilled his destiny, but he didn’t know if he wanted that destiny anymore. “I’m tired; I just want it all to end.”

But the bond prevented him from that finality. He could not find eternal peace and freedom from those mortal chains until he had achieved his purpose. He was not resentful or disappointed as he thought he would be. “I feel the pull to the light, the desire to leave all this behind like I never have before. Maybe because I have never had a reason to live before. If only it was that simple, then maybe I would allow myself to imagine what could be. But Maz is wrong; it is too late. I can’t take back what I’ve done, and part of me doesn’t want to.”

His primary purpose had been to destroy Luke and the Jedi Order. Luke was dead, regrettably not
by his hand. The Jedi Order was nearly eliminated, save for his equal in the light. His second objective had been to destroy his father and the most important thing to him. He had... killed his father, but his death brought him anything but the promised peace. And that piece of garbage ship was in the hands of the Resistance. His final mission was to destroy his mother and everything she loved. He failed to kill her. He knew he would fail again. The New Republic was gone. And his mother’s last political legacy, the Resistance, couldn’t be destroyed without endangering...

“You...” he spoke gently to the sleeping form across the room from him, “There is no escape from you.” By his calculations, her world must be 19 hours into its 20-hour day cycle. At least she was sleeping. He wondered if he terrorized her thoughts as often as she captivated his. He spent his days in this conflicted purgatory between begging for the bond to end and longing for moments like this. She had created an unbearable conflict in his soul. “You are my greatest weakness. And I am your greatest... enemy.”

“You should never have touched my hand. You should never have come to me. You should never have spared my life.” There were moments when she looked at him the way she did in that elevator, but they were fleeting, yet tormenting. Then the darkness in her that he didn’t yet understand returned, and they continued the endless war with each other that he never wanted to begin with. “There are questions I wish I could ask you. What do you see when you study me? Why do you have hope in me? Why didn’t you kill me? Why don’t you remember? You look at me with hatred, but all I can think about is wishing I could just touch your hand again. I want impossible things. You will never see me as more than a monster. But you... have created this weakness... no, this madness inside me that is more powerful than any resolution I claim to have. My will to fight is gone. There is no hope. Rey, you will be the death of me.”

“Please, Ben.” she breathed, distracting him from his thoughts. Her face twisted into a grimace. Her breathing was shallow. He recognized the signs; it was another nightmare. Abandoning his datapad, he stood and swiftly moved to her side. He knew how she reacted the last time she awoke to his presence, but she beguiled him. She was bundled up in a ball, embracing Luke’s text. Her teeth chattered. The nights were warm on Barkhesh; why was she cold? Instinctively, he knelt and reached for a grey thermosensitive blanket on the floor. He was only slightly surprised when he felt the soft material against his fingertips. He lifted the blanket and compelled the Force to gently lower it over her.

He stole a glance at her face. He was rarely privy to this side of her. Most of their interactions involved venomous words, hateful stares and something being blasted, thrown, or otherwise forced in his general direction. There was usually a fierceness in her fiery eyes, her eyebrows creased, her lips pressed firmly in a scowl – except for the moments she wanted something from him, of course. But now, softness rested on her features. It wasn’t her beauty in that softness that surprised him – she was beautiful on the battlefield – it was her peace.

She looked impossibly young asleep; her eyelids masked the burdens and suffering held within her irises, producing an innocent, tranquil effect. The hardships of a stolen childhood were absent from her usually heated eyes. He supposed it was he that made her look that way. He imagined she
looked upon the pilot or the traitor with the compassion he had seen in her once; something he hadn’t deserved in the first place and most certainly wouldn’t deserve again. Regardless, she looked different, almost unrecognizable this way. He wondered if he looked different when he slept as well. Not likely, since he was usually only awoken by his own screams.

Her eyelashes fluttered, caressing the sprinkling of freckles on her tanned cheeks. His eyes trailed down to her lips. They looked soft both in composition and expression. Her hair was free of its bindings, errant strands falling sweetly across her cheek. He longed to brush the hair behind her ear, so he could better look upon her face, but he was not imprudent enough to risk her wrath. She shifted, wrapping the blanket tighter around her shoulders, smiling. His pulse quickened. He wished he could give her a reason to smile at him like that again. Revulsion immediately tightened in his chest.

_This sentimentality is sickening._

It was his voice, though in the back of his mind he knew the thought was merely an echo of a voice no longer capable of speaking. He nearly ripped the blanket away from her as he grappled with the darkness. It wasn’t often that he struggled with the darkness around her, every moment she was there was almost a reprieve. This darkness was stronger than he had felt in days. The part he didn’t understand, was that it was directed toward her.

_She would kill me if our positions were reversed yet, I behave like a foolish child. No, I have no compassion for her. This means nothing, the blanket – it was practical. Her whimpering was distracting. I won’t allow myself to be distracted again. But it would be so easy, though, wouldn’t it? End all my conflict now, and kill her –_

_No!_

Kylo staggered away from her in fear. The farther he moved from her, the more his mind cleared.

_What was that?_

He was tired, he convinced himself. He just needed to sleep. Once she was gone, he would try for an hour or two. Forcing himself back to his desk and away from her, he collapsed into his seat in a huff as the darkness abated. The terrifying thoughts disappeared with the darkness. Clearing his throat as he cleared his mind, he forced himself to concentrate on the report at his datapad. He studied the screen carefully, struggling to remember where he had left off. He read the same sentence nine times before he accepted that his concentration was hopelessly lost. Closing his eyes, he hoped meditation would focus his mind instead. She stirred, and his eyes snapped open.
“No, Ben,” she whimpered. He jumped to his feet and rushed to her bedside. But as he knelt beside her, he realized she was still asleep. He was wary of waking her, but he was undeniably drawn to her. Just being in her presence caused a warm swell in his chest, which he fettered by clenching his jaw. The shadow of darkness passed over him again, and he realized she was its source. He would have been more concerned if the darkness didn’t help convince him it was nothing.

She was dreaming about... him, in a nightmare. He presumed she was reliving the events of the throne room. Don’t go this way, she had pleaded. But what she had asked of him was impossible. How did she not see that he couldn’t go back to the light as she had hoped? How could she have expected him to go back with her to the Resistance? Was she truly that naïve? He was certain she could see the truth now. There was no hope for him. He was nothing but a monster to her. And she was nothing but a distraction to him.

She slept, albeit fitfully, as he sat there... trapped. He couldn’t focus on his reports, he couldn’t meditate, he certainly couldn’t use the sonic shower... he couldn’t go to bed because she was in it, suffering nightmares. He sighed ruefully as he remembered the source of those nightmares.

Not that he blamed her for suffering nightmares. When he first searched her mind on Starkiller - and every time she searched the Force for his knowledge since - more of her memories from Jakku were revealed to him, inevitably culminating in what he had seen in that hut. The memories were horrifying. Kylo would never understand how she had become such a good, honest person after the perpetual Hell she had endured.

For fourteen years, she had no one. She was a slave. She was never safe, not one day. She had nothing. Every day was a struggle to survive. Whether it was the beasts, the other scavengers, the harsh conditions, or the hunger – there was always something trying to kill her. He understood that fight better than any of her “family” ever could. They both hungered for the people who failed them. But Rey faced another hunger. She was tormented by the emptiness that dominated every moment of every day. It was an all-consuming monster that screamed and clawed and ached until it was satiated again.

Basic comforts were such an easy thing to take for granted, but to watch how she suffered made it impossible for him to ever forget. She shivered in the remnants of an old AT-AT, counting her days by scratching marks in a wall like a prisoner. It was something he had taken to imitating on the wall in his quarters. Kylo hadn’t decided what his marks were for yet. Was it counting the day since he had become Supreme Leader? Was it counting the days since the last day he had seen her in person? Or was it counting down the days until his death? Nothing seemed as depressing as counting the days until she was reunited with her parents, whose bodies were rotting in those sands the whole time.
When he had learned about scavengers growing up, he’d heard about liquor addicts and users who traded junk to make money for their habit. Like her dirty, junkie parents who threw her away like garbage, left her for dead, for nothing. She was different, she didn’t choose that life. She was forced into a lifetime of slavery because her parents decided to abandon her on the most backwater planet in the galaxy. If they weren’t dead, he’d kill them himself. He wondered now how many of them were like her, stuck there due to circumstance rather than choice. It was why the galaxy needed the Order. He didn’t know how she survived without it. Not only survived, but continued to have hope.

He remembered the Ghtroc 690 light freighter that she salvaged from that ship graveyard. She spent a month repairing it, using the parts she could have traded for food to restore it. She starved herself to the point of exhaustion in the hope that trading the ship to Plutt would earn her enough portions to not have to feel hunger for once in her life. She could have taken that ship and escaped off-world, but all she wanted was not to be hungry anymore.

And once she finally finished the repairs, it was all stolen from her the moment she brought it to Niima Outpost. All her hope was taken from her in one moment as other scavengers took off on her ship. Yet all she did was break the lenses out of an old stormtrooper helmet. She didn’t even crack them in her anger, because she later reused the lenses for goggles. That was all she did. He had leveled villages for less. Yet she persisted and endured, struggling to survive, with hope. For someone whose life revolved around collecting parts, losing the material things never bothered her... only the people.

How old was she when her parents died? Five? She cried herself to sleep every night, convincing herself they would come back for her. She waited for them for over a decade. She suffered daily, she almost died, waiting for them. But they abandoned her, sold her into slavery! They didn’t deserve the sand they were buried in. Yet she never held a thread of contempt for them. Why?

Kylo had witnessed in those memories how the others beat her, treated her as their property, stole the parts she scavenged, and left her for starving. She had every reason to become a monster like him. How could the torment she suffered create someone who understood him like no other, but was also everything he could never be? She was not who she was because of her upbringing, but rather in spite of it.

She was kind. She saved the likes of Plutt and that Teedo from certain death. She found the body of a TIE pilot, the enemy, still strapped in his ejector seat and yet she showed him the kindness of a proper burial. The kindness she had shown toward the enemy was more than she had experienced in her entire life. That was who Rey always had been. It was how he justified speaking with her in the early bond connections. If he could just show her the “error” in her thinking, then she would understand what his family never could.

It was his understanding of her, however, that had changed everything. Despite her strength, she
had shown him what she suffered underneath. It was that moment of vulnerability that led him to say those three fateful words in the hut, which altered his course irrevocably. He wondered if the other anarchists had seen through the powerful warrior to the suffering underneath. She hid it well. The only reason he knew that she still agonized over that torture was the nightmares that kept her up at night.

When he had searched her mind in the interrogation room, he had focused on her dreams. In his search, he had also found her nightmares. He knew of one nightmare about the scavenger she called Teng, who was ripped to shreds in front of her eyes by steelpeckers. She threw up the meal she had just eaten and hated herself for weeks for being upset about the wasted food when he had lost his life.

He had seen the nightmare when she was very small and trapped in a sandstorm. She hadn’t eaten in almost a week, and she quickly became dehydrated. She fell to her knees and curled in upon herself, waiting for the inevitable. She called out for anyone to help her, but no one did, and it was then that she realized how lonely she truly was. Kylo understood that moment of understanding all too well.

The other nightmare he had witnessed was what he referred to as “the incident.” It was, coincidentally, the only way he could refer to what had happened without exploding into a murderous rage. That nightmare he had witnessed the night before they were connected again after Taris, when she was sleeping. He’d destroyed forty-seven training droids that night, only stopping when Hux threw another fit in which he demanded to know if he was “insane,” which truly was anyone’s guess. His arms had ached so profoundly when she had leaned against him as she cried that first connection after, and it was the only thing that centered him from exploding again at the thought of what she had suffered. Kylo did not have long in his life, but he would die content if he had the chance to kill those two thugs.

They were ordered by Plutt to protect her, and they may have saved her from the others, but they didn’t protect her from themselves. Rey, so innocent, had believed they cornered her to steal the parts she salvaged. She was so young, she had no idea why they wanted to hold her down. She had no idea the ways they could... hurt her. He swallowed the instant rage that swelled inside him again, releasing a long breath as he tried to remind himself that it wasn’t his fight. Rey had fought with an unparalleled ferocity, even blinding the one with the red tattoos in one eye – something he wished he could claim he had done when facing his own demons. He knew he would never look at that quarterstaff the same, or her reason for carrying it. Though she suffered nightmares, he was thankful it was not those monsters that haunted her that night.

He would never tell her how her suffering affected him, how he admired her, how he wished he had the strength to shoulder her burdens as well. They were hollow words, useless platitudes when the damage had already been done.
But if he had a time machine, he would use it to take him back to two places. The first was the
day she was abandoned. He would take her away before her family flew off, and he would bring her
to his parents. They would have found someone – a Force-sensitive who understood her – to give her
the life she deserved. After she was safe, he would go back to that night at the temple. He would
sneak into his own hut where the younger version of himself slept. He once imagined he would lie
in wait for Luke, but not anymore. If he had the chance now, he would sneak in long before Luke
did and kill Ben Solo himself.

*Three hundred and eight.*

It would have saved three hundred and eight lives taken by his own hand. It would have saved
hundreds, maybe thousands more that had fallen by his orders. How could he trust in a Force that
would allow him to survive so others would suffer? How was that *fair*? How could the Jedi believe
in its benevolence? The Cosmic Force had created the Skywalkers, who had done nothing but bring
the galaxy pain. Their only destiny was to deliver death through its will. He had become exactly
what it had wanted him to become since the day he was born.

Kylo was so deeply focused on the past that he didn’t recognize another presence in the room.
“Oh,” a soft, feminine voice said, snapping his attention to the doorway. “I wasn’t expecting you
here.” She gasped, slapping her hand over her mouth, but it wasn’t in terror. He didn’t have a
chance to consider her reaction further. When she removed her hand, her words tumbled out quickly
and awkwardly. “That came out wrong… why wouldn’t you be here… not that you’re really here.
Wait, are you?”

Kylo held her questioning gaze in shock. Every muscle in his body had simultaneously lost its
ability to move. “You must be Ben,” she continued. You’re Leia’s son.” The young woman stared
at him… kindly, as if she were happy to see him. Why would a member of the Resistance be happy
to see her enemy, the *Supreme Leader*? Kylo stared down at himself. Clad in a sleeveless
undershirt and trousers, he certainly didn’t *look* like the Supreme Leader. And had she called him
Ben? “What am I saying? Of course, you know you’re Leia’s son,” the woman continued
nervously. “I just meant… I know you… I don’t *know* you; I know who you are… I’m Rey... well,
obviously I’m not Rey, I’m Rey’s friend.” She exhaled slowly before clearing her throat. “Hi, I’m
Rose.”

Kylo was stunned into silence. What did this woman want? What would she *do*? From what he
could discern, she carried no weapon. Still, Kylo was paralyzed under her gaze. He didn’t know
what to do. Or say. Should he awaken Rey? Should he call his weapon from his desk? Would it
make it worse? Thankfully, she filled the silence with further explanation. “I’m sure you’re
wondering how I know who you are and Rey will probably be angry with me telling you, since I
promised her I wouldn’t tell anyone about her relationship with you, but technically I’m *not* telling
you, because you already know.” Rose gasped in a breath as he tried to make sense of her
breathless rambling. He wondered when she would turn on him, when she would condemn him for
who he was.
Curiously, the anger never came. “The other night – when she kissed… well, you know… she was very upset after your fight. She created this Force whirlwind and knocked us over when it exploded out of her like a thermal detonator… without the fire, of course. And I made her tell me what happened. Don’t be angry at Rey, but she told me who you are. I didn’t even know Leia had a son. I swear, all she told me was that you had a falling out with your mother and you broke her heart when you wouldn’t come back with her to the Resistance. I know you’re angry, and I don’t know what happened, and this probably isn’t my place, but Rey needs you. I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I think you’re the only one who could help her. She has a Force bond with Kylo Ren.” With those words, Kylo finally understood. Rose had no idea that Ben Solo and Kylo Ren were one and the same. He could have feigned surprise, asked her all she knew about their bond, but for some inexplicable reason, he didn’t want to lie to the young woman.

“I know,” he murmured, breaking his silence. “I wish it were different, for her sake.”

Rose took that as invitation to join him at Rey’s side. She lowered herself onto the stone floor by the sacrificial altar and stared up at him. Her bright, bubbly, awkward personality reminded him of a young Jedi at the temple. He refused to remember the other student’s name; he didn’t deserve it. This young woman should run before he hurt her too. But she didn’t leave. She stared at him as if he wasn’t the monster the Resistance knew him to be. But why wouldn’t she – she had no idea she was staring into the eyes of a monster. “What can we do?” she asked.

“There is nothing we can do. A Force bond is not easily broken.” He had tried. It had been impossible to imagine a life without the bond – how had he survived before – but he had tried with everything he had to give her a life free of him. He wasn’t strong enough. There was only one way to break the bond. “To end her suffering, Kylo Ren would have to die.”

Rose nodded slowly, understand the gravity of the situation Rey faced. “You’re the only other Force-user I know who can help her. Rey hasn’t told Leia. Can you come back? Can you kill him?”

Kylo sighed as he studied his sleeping bondmate. “Trust me, I’ve tried, but it’s complicated.” I don’t know why, but she won’t let me. Most days the darkness in her wants to kill me, but other days the light in her fears it. If I knew it would make her happy, if I knew she would be safe, I would end it all.

“So you know him, then?”

“I do,” he rasped. I am the monster you fear. I have taken three hundred and eight lives. He was suddenly overcome with weight of his greatest sins. “Kylo Ren killed my father.”
Rose gasped. The sympathetic tears swelling her eyes twisted the dagger of guilt in his gut. “This is dangerous for her. If you came back to the Resistance…”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t.” Kylo didn’t know why he didn’t just tell her who he was. It would soothe the ache in his chest when the pity in her eyes transformed into fear… disgust… hatred. But for some reason, he couldn’t bring himself to do it. “Kylo Ren is the reason I can never come back to the Resistance,” he said instead. He hated himself for his weakness.

She leaned forward, reaching for his hand. “If you love her…”

“I said I can’t!” he shouted, tearing his hand away before she could touch him. Could she touch him? His skin crawled at the thought.

There was a soft sound and Kylo remembered that there was another person in that room. They both froze and turned to where Rey rested on the sacrificial altar in sleep. Her eyes were still closed to the galaxy, but she was trembling and mumbling in her dreams. “Please, Ben…” It was his name, his face, that tormented her nightmares.

“See,” Rose said, gesturing to her friend. “All she wants is–”

“Don’t.”

Rose must have sensed the strength of the emotions threatening to rip him to shreds, because she offered him a half-smile and nodded. “Okay, well, I should go before she wakes up. It was… nice to meet you, Ben.” She wiped her hands on her dusty trousers and stood. It was a position of vulnerability – her standing as he remained seated – but he allowed it. She was his enemy, and yet, he allowed something he would have never granted to a member of the First Order. Perhaps it was due to the fact he barely had to incline his head to meet her gaze, or perhaps it was something else. Perhaps it was trust that had wormed its way across the bond. “Even if you can’t come back,” she said. “I’m glad she has someone who she trusts watching out for her.”

With those heart wrenching words, she turned to leave. Without considering the consequences, he allowed the word past his lips. “Wait.” Even though she didn’t answer, he knew she was hesitating just inside the doorway. He couldn’t bring himself to look up at her. “I know you have no reason to trust me, but if you could not tell Rey or my mother about this…”
“I won’t,” she replied softly. “It isn’t my story to tell. But I hope you’ll tell them. You may not be ready to come back, but I believe you can. So does Rey. If I know anything about your mother, she believes in you too.” With that, she was gone. Kylo couldn’t help the shuddering breath as he struggled to keep his emotions at bay. It was nothing he had expected when facing a member of the Resistance. Though, to be fair, she didn’t know who he truly was. If she had, he doubted she would have spared him such kindness.

“Where are you, Ben?” Rey whimpered again in her sleep. “Come back.” He sighed, watching the familiar struggle of drowning in a sea of memories.

“You might hate me for this, but I can’t stand to hear you suffer.” He knew how she hated “mind control.” Placing his hand next to her temple, he projected the first peaceful image he thought of. It was the image of a familiar lake. The calm, sparkling water lulled her with tranquility as he fought back the ache of resurfacing memories. It was useless; once the childhood memories broke through his defenses, the darkest ones found their way inside. He was reminded of a night by a burning temple, and a whisper barely perceptible over the pouring rain. Close your eyes. Think of someplace beautiful.

The whimpers faded as they had that night, and Rey fell into a restful sleep. “I’m sorry,” he said, his voice heavy with emotion. “I did what I had to do.”

Her eyes blinked open at his words, but they were still clouded with the haze of sleep. “Ben?” He was silent, hoping her drowsiness would drag her back to the unconscious world. She smiled softly and closed her eyes again. “Was it worth it?” she asked.

Burning the temple? Joining the First Order? Killing my father? Becoming Supreme Leader? Asking you to join me? Nearly killing you on Crait?

“Was what worth it?”

She didn’t say, but he found his answer to every single one of those questions was, no.

With a huff, he moved to his desk and reopened his messages. Those three words stared back at him, taunting him.

Why those coordinates?
His fingers typed the words and sent the reply before he could reconsider. Kylo stared at the screen as the truth stared back at him. He nearly threw the datapad across the room, but he hesitated. Panic set in as he realized what he had done - what he had done through his *personal* messages tied to First Order servers. With trembling fingers, he deleted the evidence of the exchange. Those three words in response – three consequential words – were burned into his vision long after they disappeared.

*You know why.*
Suicidal ideation

Kylo briefly talks about contemplating suicide

Starvation, suffering and implication of sexual assault

It does not go into detail, or suggest exactly what happened, but Kylo speaks briefly of what he saw in Rey's mind
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Rey awoke with a dread she could not place and a longing she did not want to. The blanket she swore she had kicked off in the night was wrapped snugly around her. She had no idea how to determine the time; the light of the sun did not penetrate to the lower levels of the temple, and she did not have a chronometer. She found that she had either been oversleeping lately, or not sleeping at all, because of the perpetual darkness.

She didn’t know what to do with herself except lie there, but the longer she did, the more her thoughts began to mirror the darkness around her. It was lonely, but the others all had their places in the Resistance; she didn’t fit in anywhere. The longer she stayed in that room, the more she found herself anticipating the next connection. He had been… comforting the last time she saw him. At the very least, he would understand how the loneliness was eating her alive. Forcing herself to sit up, she decided to take a walk outside before she contemplated more treasonous thoughts about her enemy.

The light blinded her when she stepped through the archway of the temple. After her upbringing on a desert planet, she never thought her eyes would have difficulty adjusting to the sun, especially because this star did not shine nearly as bright as the one on Jakku. The darkness of the temple was taking more of a toll on her than she had thought. When her eyes did adjust, she noticed a disturbance near the edge of the forest. It was a creature in distress, she realized, its cries echoing up the temple steps. She skipped down the steps to its rescue without a moment’s thought.

A small, grey-brown winged creature had been caught in the snare of a carnivorous plant. The meter-long stalk was orange with large, shimmering purple petals. It was captivating, and, had she not witnessed its lethality, she would never have guessed such danger was hidden in its beauty.

“It’s okay, little one,” she cooed, “I’ll help you.” She grasped the flower carefully and dislodged the creature from its clutches. The creature fluttered frantically in her hands, covered in a warm slime. She used her tunic to gently wipe it clean.

It was an ugly beast, to put it mildly. Its forearms had been evolutionarily converted to wings with thin, soft membranes that attached at its backbone. Dorsal spikes were also connected by a similar membrane. In addition to the spikes, the creature had claws that tore through flesh like blades. It had long fangs that protruded from its snarling jaws. It snapped at her gentle caresses as she attempted to console it.

The dark, crazed eyes were glazed over in fear of her touch. She did nothing to harm it, but it
lashed out at her all the same. It gasped for breath, struggling wildly, trembling in her arms. Its sharp fangs and claws tore into her palm, but she ignored its destruction in favor of saving it. Eventually, her stubbornness won out, as she knew it would, and it settled into the comfort of her gentle hands, nestling against her. It still did not trust her; its wide eyes – endless pools of fear and pain – followed her every move. She couldn’t help but think of different pained eyes.

“I’ll name you... Ben,” she cooed, imagining her bond mate’s face when she showed him the creature, complete with a designation in homage to his given name rather than his chosen moniker.

“What creature are you trying to save now?” a voice asked behind her. She turned to him and smiled. Her only concern was whether he had overheard her.

“This hideous little thing,” she opened her hands enough for him to study it.

“Well, that looks similar to a Borgle bat – maybe a young one, because they get huge,” Finn replied as he fidgeted with his jacket. She could sense the blanket of anxiety that enveloped him. It was something unfamiliar when it came to her happy-go-lucky friend. “They’re dangerous, Rey. The bigger ones will drain you of your blood in a heartbeat.”

“Oh, you don’t look so dangerous,” she whispered to the creature, as blood trickled down her arms from the wounds on her palms. “You’ll be okay; I’ll take care of you.”

“Rey,” Finn sighed, “that’s not a pet. You can’t save everything.”

“But I can save him,” she caressed its trembling wings with her fingers. “I can’t just leave him in the forest. He will die. I have to help him.”

Finn stared out into the forest for a moment, then returned his attention to her. His eyes caught hers, and they were dark with insinuation. “Sometimes it’s better if these creatures just die. Let fate run its course before they turn on you.”

“You’re not being fair, Finn. He trusts me. You don’t know he will turn on me.” Her sharp tone betrayed forbidden thoughts she shouldn’t have revealed to Finn. They both knew that the conversation had morphed into more than an injured Borgle bat.

Finn nodded toward her bleeding palms. “It looks like he already has.”
“He thought I would hurt him before, like everything else in this forest, but I helped him. See? He’s different now.”

*Please just see him as I see him.*

“He’s a feral beast, Rey,” he replied, his tone uncharacteristically acerbic. “You know nothing about this creature; you know nothing of what he’s capable of. You’ve seen his eyes; they still belong to a beast. You may have him cornered, suffering, and trapped, but that doesn’t mean you’ve tamed him. You pity his pain and whatever restraint you have mistaken for gentleness. The first thing I learned in training on-world is that a suffering beast is the most dangerous, because they are desperate... and unpredictable. But helping a creature doesn’t change its instincts, its nature. You think you can tame him, but a beast will never make a suitable... companion. He will never be more than the murderous monster he is, no matter what you think you see in him.”

“Are we still talking about this bat, Finn?” she contended. She was more determined than ever to help rehabilitate the creature to prove it wouldn’t turn on her.

“Are we, Rey?” he countered. He glared at her knowingly for a moment, before patting her on the shoulder. “I’m late; I have to go meet Rose. We’ll talk about your naïve compassion for creatures of murder later, but this is... important.” He scratched his arm anxiously and set off down the path into the trees.

“It’s okay, don’t mind him,” she whispered to the creature. “I’ll take you back to the temple and get you all fixed up. You’re safe now.” She slid her finger across its trembling head, trying to soothe it, but ripped her hand away as she sensed its suffering through the Force. “No...”

Rey opened her hands as the creature’s trembling became worse. Its body tensed, the pain evident in its shrill cries, and all at once she realized the creature’s condition was bleaker than she had previously thought. She held it close to her chest, willing its convulsing to end.

*Please,* she begged the Force. Her answer was the fading of its energy in the Force. It was dying. She knew from the moment she touched it that there was no hope to save it. She was resolved to embrace it until it was reclaimed by the Force. “I won’t leave you,” she promised. “I’m so sorry. I can’t save you.” But the Force had other plans. A quick and painless death would have been too easy for Rey to witness. Its convulsing grew worse, as its cries became gurgling, labored breaths, and a black fluid flowed from its mouth. She shuddered every time it seized in agony, but the poor creature continued to struggle in futility, refusing to surrender to inevitable peace. It was clear the Force would take it, but she couldn’t stand by and watch it suffer.
Tears streamed down her face as she whispered soothing platitudes. Before she had a chance to reconsider, she placed her fingers around the struggling creature’s head and quickly snapped its neck, instantly ending its suffering. Her stomach rolled with nausea as she collapsed to the ground, softly stroking the lifeless creature. The forest had become silent in the absence of the unmistakable sounds of the throes of death. She became all too aware that she was alone.

What had she done?

No, no, no, please, come back.

This was not the will of the Force, she had killed him! As the creature lay limp in her hands, she wondered if she had been wrong. What if she could still have saved him? Why had she given up on him? She had never given up on anyone, even when it had seemed hopeless. How could she have taken a life that was not hers to take? Was this the darkness? Can she no longer trust her own thoughts? What would have been the right thing to do? Who had she become?

She was broken from her mourning by the sound of voices in the trees. She stood, nearly trance-like, grasping the lifeless creature to her chest. Her feet willed her forward through the forest, almost hypnotized the lure of the voices. The desire to find anyone to talk to in that moment of languishing loneliness became a driving need. Still holding the perished bat in her arms, she walked deeper into the rainforest. Two forms strolled down the path in front of her. Finn and Rose.

Neither of her friends had noticed her following them as they turned down another path. She almost called out to them, but chose instead not to intrude on their private moment. She could sense Finn’s anxious energy as he pulled Rose along the path. Using the Force for deception would be frowned upon by Luke, she was sure of it. But she wanted to know what would happen between them, what was so important to tell her, without ruining the moment.

Follow them, the voice whispered. Listen.

Were they talking about her? Kylo? Plans to attack the First Order? They were not Force-sensitive, and it would be too easy to use a simple trick, but would it work if she knew them? Would it work on two people at the same time? She knew she could find the knowledge from him, just as she had apparently done while on Starkiller. His energy was simple to find over the bond and simpler to tap into.

He doesn’t have to know.
The ability to persuade more than one person was surprisingly simple. She wondered briefly if he would notice, but brushed away the concern, maintaining that it was worth the risk. Certainly, she could explain the necessity for the knowledge later. She could feel his darkness – or was it her own – flow through her as she waved her hand.

“You will not notice me,” she said in a calm, but commanding tone. Both Finn and Rose stopped in their tracks, repeating her. “Or hear me!” she added. Guilt pricked at the tiny hairs on the back of her neck. *If it's anything too private, I will just leave,* she rationalized. She wondered if the persuasion had worked, but she could feel the Force vibrating around her. As long as she could feel it vibrating, as it did when she was connected to Kylo, then she presumed it was protecting her from being discovered.

Finn pulled Rose to a rock that overlooked a beautiful, smooth flowing river. The plants that grew along the river were beautiful shades of orange, yellow and purple. They opened and closed like twinkling stars, and Rey wondered if those were dangerous too. Why was everything beautiful in the galaxy so dangerous?

Finn guided Rose to the rock and knelt on the soft ground in front of her. He grabbed her hands and stared nervously in her eyes. His body was visibly shaking. “What is this all about Finn?”

“I want to thank you...for waiting for me. I told you I needed time to think, and you were more understanding than I could ever hope for. You never gave up on me. Rose, you are wise and smart and brave and kind and determined and strong and honest, and, for some reason, you chose to love me like no one ever has. Sure, we argue and drive each other crazy sometimes, but that is because we are honest with each other. And you know there is nothing more important than trust. I know, until now, this has seemed like an ‘unrequited love’ as you said the other night. And I’m sorry.” he sighed. “Here it goes.”

“Rose, I am passionately, devotedly, deeply in love with you. I am sorry it took your near-death for me to get that through my head, and I am sorry that I ran away from it until now. I was scared. I have had very few people in my life that I love. My parents were taken away from me...Slip died in my arms... I let Rey in, and I almost lost her. I was just so scared to let you in my heart, too.

“You have the ability to break it, Rose, and you almost did. The thought of losing you forced me to face my feelings for you, but it also opened my eyes to how broken I would be if you were taken from me, too. I was scared that if I allowed myself to love you, I was opening my heart up to be destroyed, because this whole love thing is terrifying. But Poe helped me realize that running away doesn’t stop me from loving you with everything in me. It only stops you from knowing the truth. And if I were to lose you, the only difference would have been my regret in never telling you how much you mean to me. I love you, Rose—more than I thought I was capable of loving anyone. I
don’t want to run away anymore. And I know that our love is new, but I have never been so sure of anything my entire life.

“I want us to have a hope to look forward to. I want a light at the end of this darkness. I want a reason for us to fight to live through this, even when the outcome looks bleak. So... I know this is sudden, and crazy, but the war has made me realize exactly what I want,” he gulped, shifting uncomfortably, “Rose Tico, the moment we have won and this miserable war ends, will join my little family; will you marry me?”

Rose’s eyes grew wide, and her hands clasped over her mouth. He offered his hand to her, the only thing in the galaxy that he had. Rose stared at his hand and back up at him. Rey’s heart beat wildly in her chest as she waited for the answer.

“I love you, Finn. Nothing would make me happier than join your family and spend the rest of my life with you,” Rose smiled as tears fell softly down her cheeks. She accepted his hand, and he pulled her to him, passionately kissing her.

Rey smiled.
Death

An animal dies graphically
Beasts

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

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Rey stared down in silence upon the two figures playing by the river. And he stood in the shadows, watching her. Kylo had reports, briefings, important orders to approve... but he stood, leaning against the wall in his quarters – or a tree on her planet – waiting patiently for her to disappear again. She had brought him here; he was certain of it. He had sensed her attempting to sift through his consciousness again. Then she had appeared in front of him, as she followed her friends through the trees. The most confusing aspect was that she had never once seemed to notice he was there.

After interrupting her kiss with Dameron, Kylo was pressed to consider what he could witness when the Force dragged them together. Of all the scenes he had imagined, and feared, the one he had disrupted was not at the top of the list. It was baffling to watch her perform a Jedi mind trick on her own friends. Perhaps, she was not as loyal to them as he had previously thought. She betrayed their trust so she could spy on... a marriage proposition.

She may have been capable of hiding it from them, but he could sense her emotions. At first, it was happiness. But then her emotions grew darker, and he could feel her jealousy. Why? Had the traitor seen her darkness or her interest in the pilot? Had he rejected her? Did she wish that proposal was for her? Kylo would have been more than happy to kill him to avenge her jealous heart.

Rey sat with her arms wrapped around her raised knees, staring up into the dark canopy above her. “Why can’t I just be happy for them?” she cried to herself. “I am a horrible friend. The worst. I should be congratulating them, but instead, I’m watching them like some creature in the shadows, like... like... him!”

The ironic accuracy of her words was not lost on him, but it wasn’t his fault she had dragged him across the galaxy to scavenge his training.

“There is nothing about their love that should upset me. They are perfect for each other. Anyone else would be happy, and that’s it. I mean, I am happy for them.”

You sound thrilled.
“I just don’t understand it.”

I do... you love him.

Kylo had believed the traitor loved her in return when he so nobly defended her on Starkiller. Though Kylo knew better than anyone that she did not need defending. When he was young, Kylo read stories of beautiful princesses who needed rescuing by brave men. He was told it was intended to be romantic. It never made sense to him, however. In his family, the women didn’t need a brave man to rescue them, they had no trouble rescuing themselves. He had always admired how strong his mother was. He had never expected anything less from his female Knights, officers, or stormtroopers than their male counterparts. When he had faced Rey, he feared her strength. He had never found anyone particularly attractive, before his bondmate, but if there one quality he would have searched for, strength would have topped the list. Along with honesty and loyalty, of course, two traits his mother didn’t possess.

“Why can’t I have that? Why can’t I have one person who sees me for me? Who wants me?” she whispered. She didn’t love the traitor, he realized, she was jealous of what he had. She wanted that belonging, that respite toloneliness. He understood it all too well. After the life she lived, she deserved that. Han should have dropped her off at the nearest ecumenopolis and given her a chance at a normal life; she would never find it with a group of anarchists who put the cause above all else.

“Why can’t he look at me the way Finn looks at her?”

Kylo could guess to whom she was referring – the pilot. Rey didn’t understand like he did that Poe Dameron would never admire her power and strength. All the pilot saw was physical beauty. Rey was beautiful; there was no doubt about that. Her skin looked smooth to touch, her shiny hair looked soft, her lips looked warm; he could stare into her eyes until the end of time… stop thinking of such perversions.

She was beautiful, but there were qualities Poe Dameron would never appreciate about Rey. Her forgiveness and compassion, yes, but also her ferocity. Rey was a warrior, and a man like Poe Dameron wouldn’t admire her. Kylo had been inside his mind. He would fear her if he saw her darkness, because he did not understand her. Not like Kylo did.

“Why can’t he look after me while I sleep? Or be overwhelmed by his love for me? Why can’t he care for my safety, be my belonging, stand by me? Why? Why wouldn’t he be destroyed by my death? Why couldn’t he offer me what Finn offered her?”
Kylo bit his tongue before he responded sharply and caused more turmoil between them. *If you wanted those things, you shouldn’t have left me. I offered you everything! I offered you the entire galaxy!* He felt the bitterness of her rejection resurface. Every time he saw her, that betrayal would fade away just being in her presence. It was pathetic. He had offered himself to her… and she had tried to kill him in return. She wanted a connection, but she had destroyed theirs. He knew why. Rey wanted those things from someone like Poe Dameron, not a monster like him; that was the difference.

“This is all your fault, Ben!” she shouted into the trees. “I can’t even enjoy my best friend’s proposal because of you!”

Kylo froze. Had she finally realized he was there?

“I am nothing to you!” she continued, rolling from her seated position onto her back. She covered her eyes with her hands. “And I am forced to see what could have been every time I see your face! In the hut, in the elevator, and especially at Kamino there was a moment when I ... well, I thought it was different, that *you* were different. But then I realized that you don’t care at all. Every time I see you, I can see the man I thought you were. But you are *not* the man who told me I’m not alone. I just want to hate you, Ben."

It took everything inside him not to respond to her; not to scream every last word that was left unsaid, to tear at his skin until it bled like his heart, to bare his soul to her so she could see the wound she had left behind. He had been foolish enough to believe *she* was different. But she only cared for her friends and what he could do to help them.

“Maybe I was stupid to believe you, Ben. Maybe I expected too much from my enemy. Maybe I only *thought* you understood me. I am surrounded by good people who care, but they don’t understand me. I can’t talk about the Force, our bond, and the darkness with them. I can’t find my belonging with them. I thought I had that with you. But you chose the First Order over me. Then you tried to kill us, and you massacred thousands of others. And now the Force torments me by connecting us.”

*She thought... she thought she had belonging me? I don’t understand, I offered that to her! Did she regret the choice she made? Will she join me now?*

His thoughts were interrupted by a movement to his left. He felt into the Force, but could only sense energy signatures in the corridor passing in front of his own chambers. The movement was on her side of the bond. Something was hunched low, stalking Rey. It emerged from its cover, only ten yards from her.
Jaggalor, or at least, it looked identical to one. He had seen a Jaggalor in a zoo on a trip to his father’s home planet as a child. It was a panther-like species with a pale, yellow hide and large black rosette spots. Its underbelly was rust-colored, hairless, and wrinkled. Two long, nerve-lined tentacle appendages grew from under its shoulder blades, used as sensory organs to detect approaching predators.

She was still lying on her back, though her hands had dropped to her side. If she sensed it, she hadn’t made a move to defend herself. The beast was closing in on its prey, and he was lightyears away. He reached out his hand and attempted to wound the creature. Unfortunately, the wave of Force crashed into the wall in his chambers on his side of the bond. His pulse intensified as he realized his Force powers were useless across the galaxy. Panic seized his senses, and he summoned his lightsaber from his desk. It was entirely possible that the lightsaber would not be capable of crossing the galaxy, but he was running out of time and options. He made his decision and lowered the barriers in his mind that he had built up against her.

Rey! Behind you!

Kylo forced the thoughts into her mind, throwing his lightsaber – willing it to her – as she jolted upright. She caught the weapon, triggered it and turned. The motion triggered a response from the predator. It launched in Rey’s direction. She swung at it but only grazed it. The creature roared, and its massive paws scratched her across her back as she completed her turn. Rey cried out and pulled the lightsaber up defensively as the creature swatted at her again. The blade cut a wound into one paw, which only served to antagonize it further. The claws of the other paw sliced down her arm in retribution. Rey stumbled back, attempting to put distance between herself and the creature.

Kylo knew he was powerless to do anything against the panther, but he was never one to stand idle. With the Force crashing through his veins, he stepped forward into the fight. Battle – this place where thoughts and emotions disappeared, where there was no right or fair, where all that mattered was survival – this was where everything made sense. His thoughts screamed of how profoundly he hated facing large, unpredictable beasts. The fear for her safety quieted as the calm certainty of battle returned. It was the only time everything melted away except the guidance of the Force. His intention was to distract the panther, giving her the opportunity to expose its weaknesses. He kicked at the creature, surprised to find that his boot connected with its hinds, but its attention remained on the lightsaber.

“My blaster!” Rey shouted, and he belatedly realized she had directed her words toward him. The panther mounted another attack against her, and he split his attention between watching the battle and searching the undergrowth of the forest for the blaster. Her lightsaber – his lightsaber – wounded it, but not enough to deter it. Her teeth were bared, mirroring its feral energy, but the beast was not deterred. The panther waited for her to strike out and caught her weak side with one of its paws. Rey was skillfully fending off its strikes with the crimson blade, but it was learning. Turning away from the fight, Kylo searched the forest floor with frantic haste. He found the weapon resting on her pack against the tree.
“Ben! Watch out!”

Calling the weapon to his hand, he barely turned before the creature was upon him. He got one shot off at its gut as it launched itself at him, but it barely seemed fazed. They both tumbled to the forest floor, and Kylo wished he had paid more attention on that trip to the zoo. Evidently, the beasts had thick hides that were impervious to most weapons. Its powerful jaws clamped down on the arm that held the blaster, and the entire world whitened out for a moment as the pain set in. When his senses returned, he kicked and hit the creature, but that only encouraged its aggressive reaction. Its paw came up to pin his chest, and its claws pierced through his tunic and skin with little resistance. He punched again, only this time he hit it in the soft spot of its throat. It released a roar in his face, its hot saliva dripping onto his cheek from its rotten-smelling jaws.

The creature released a more furious howl as Rey slashed the blade into its side. It turned on her, and with one long swipe of its paw, she was thrown to the ground as well. The lightsaber clattered from her hand across the forest floor.

“Go for the throat!” he yelled as he pushed himself off the ground.

Kylo lifted the blaster with his left arm and attempted to aim it with assistance from the Force. He fired, grazing it in the left shoulder, and the panther turned momentarily to snarl at him. Rey tried to call the lightsaber to her hand in its distraction, but when it noticed the movement, it pounced.

“Rey!”

The momentum of the creature knocked her back, pinning her underneath its massive body. It was no longer snarling, and he feared it was too late. From his vantage point, it looked as though the beast had her neck in its jaws. Kylo pushed himself up and sprinted to help his bondmate. He abandoned the blaster; if he shot the beast, he could shoot her too. His only option was to tackle the creature and face it weaponless. With a strength unassisted by the Force, he crashed into the creature and tackled it away from her. Kylo prepared himself for close-quarter combat with razor-sharp claws, but the beast slumped to the side with a smoking hole in the soft tissue of its neck. He had enough experience with lightsaber wounds to recognize one and know this one had been instantly fatal.

When he turned on his side in panic, he found Rey staring back at him with the hilt of his lightsaber raised where the creature’s throat had been. He pushed himself to a stand, kicking the beast with his boot in petulant retribution. He stepped closer, but she didn’t push herself to her feet. Her chest was heaving as the adrenaline coursed through her veins. He wasn’t faring much better. “Are you hurt?” he asked, inspecting her wounds the best he could from a distance.
“Just some scratches, on my back and my arms,” she said breathlessly, her eyes fixed on his stare rather than the wounds. There was something in them that destabilized him. “You?”

He shook his head. Rey finally stood and brushed the red dirt from her grey trousers and tunic. His eyes were drawn to the movement of her hands, then focused on the bloodied wounds on her palms. The scratches were too small to have come from the Juggalor and too deep to have come from a fall. She followed his gaze and hid her hands from view beneath her crossed arms.

His voice was sharper and more accusatory than he had intended. “What… happened?”

“I tried to save a dying creature,” she said, refusing to look at him. He could see the reflection of tears in the corner of her eyes, and he guessed that those tears were not born of envy of her friends’ engagement. She was fierce and strong and capable, but it was her almost child-like innocence, her desire to see and be the good in the galaxy – after all the evil she had experienced – that truly intrigued him.

“I presume it did not go as you had hoped?”

She walked over to a nearby tree, and Kylo found himself following her. She was kneeling next to a young Borgle bat, reposed in death upon a shrine of rocks and flowers. He knelt beside her. “I saved him from suffering a slow death all alone, but he still died in my arms.”

“You can’t save everything, Rey,” he said softly, watching her caress the dead creature. There were likely thousands of Borgles in the forest; why did this one matter? Another thought crossed Kylo’s mind. If this was how she reacted to the death of a beast of the forest, what would she do if she lost one of her friends? They were just anarchists to him, but could he knowingly do this to her?

Rey gingerly lifted the body of the creature into her lap. Curling in on herself, she sheltered it from the world around them. It was incongruous to the Rey he’d seen in her mind. She had witnessed her fair share of death, she had been the cause of it, why was this creature any different? There was no emotional investment; it hadn’t been her pet. As far as he could tell, she had happened upon it when it was already dying. “Thanks, but I’ve already heard enough of it from Finn.”

“Maybe you should listen to him, since his opinion matters to you.” His comment was rewarded with a withering glare. He wasn’t helping. He knew he wasn’t, but he wanted her to see.
“No, I won’t. I don’t regret trying to save him. I still believe he could have been saved if I had only helped him. But I just... gave up on him.” Her voice broke and tears welled up in her eyes. “I killed Ben.”

“Ben?” he murmured. Were they still talking about the bat? The inflection in his voice betrayed his piquing curiosity. He wasn’t certain whether he should have been proud she named a treacherous beast after his old name or offended.

“Yes!”

Kylo sighed. “Maybe letting him die ended his suffering. Maybe it was the most compassionate thing you could have done for him.” It was the best he could do to comfort her. He couldn’t understand why she cared so much about the creature, or perhaps he didn’t want to. It was nature; eat or be eaten. If it died, it would have become a meal to ensure another creature's survival. Or, if it survived, it would have made a meal of another creature. What was the life of one bat in the complexity of the Cosmic Force?

What is the life of one man?

“Maybe, maybe not. But now I’ll never know.”

“He was just a creature of the darkness, Rey,” he said softly. “He wasn’t worth saving.”

She turned to glower at him. It was clear that this conversation had gone beyond the actual beast for her as much as it had for him. “Even a creature of darkness is worth saving, Ben,” she said, voice low in warning. It was also clear she did not appreciate his brand of logic. If he kept pushing, this would escalate quickly. Still, he persisted, for both their sakes.

“What about the Juggalor, was he not worthy?”

“That monster had every intention of killing me,” she argued, her eyes conveying more than her words expressed. “But the bat, he was just scared and fighting to survive. He didn’t want to hurt me.”

It irritated Kylo that he continued to push the issue obstinately when he knew she had no interest in the truth. An enemy would find arguing with her a waste of time; Rey was as deeply entrenched in
denial as he was in darkness. It irritated him further that his voice had softened in response. “Your hands suggest otherwise. He hurt you, whether he wanted to or not, because that is what beasts do.”

“He’s not a beast,” she sniffled. Her stare softened as she looked down at the lifeless animal, which wasn’t unusual when she looked upon anyone or anything other than him. “When he realized I wouldn’t hurt him, he was gentle and sweet. He wanted to live, I know it.”

“And if you saved him?” he reasoned, pushing harder to prove his point. This was not about the bat to him. This was about making her understand that she had been foolish in believing he would turn. If she just saw him for what he was, then maybe the constant tension back and forth between them could die. “He would still be a creature of darkness. You were spared the moment when his impulses inevitably returned, and he hurt you again.”

“You’re wrong.” Her voice trembled. He couldn’t decide if it was in anger, because she still believed she was right, or fear, because deep down she knew he was.

“Does it matter?” he sighed. “He’s dead either way.”

“He’s dead because I failed him. I took his life when it wasn’t mine to take.” Rey lifted the bat and reverently placed him back on the makeshift grave. Remorse trickled into the bond as he regretted his words. He hadn’t meant for them to sound that way.

“No, Rey, you didn’t fail him. You just believed you could save something that couldn’t be saved. He was never meant to survive,” he said quietly. Sorrow cut down her cheeks. He stilled his hand to prevent his fingers from wiping her tears away. “You can’t change what happened to him before you found him. You made his last moments.... peaceful.”

“I could have given him so much more. I could have shown him happiness. We could have been lonely together,” she whispered.

He sighed, the ache in his chest was new, unfamiliar. He would do anything to take her pain from her and he wanted to hate himself for it, but he didn’t. “Do you want me to find you another one?” he offered. It was a gentleness he was not accustomed to, and he had to override the impulse to say something flippant, to protect the raw wound that ached in his chest when she stared at him with such sorrow.
She shook her head through tears. “No, I want Ben back.” He worked his jaw to control his expression. “I don't want a different one, I wanted to save him,” she whispered, eyes downcast. If her eyes were not pooling with grief, he would have asked why she chose that name.

“I know, but at least Ben didn’t die alone,” was all that he could manage. Kylo was entirely unpracticed with comforting anyone, but the words had slipped out with ease. Rey turned to him, likely as surprised as he was. He could feel her light again. Softness broke through the sorrow in her eyes. Her penetrating gaze left him feeling exposed...vulnerable. It reminded him of how effortlessly Maz stared through his outer pretense as if she could read his soul. Her eyes did not seethe with hatred as he had come to expect during their interactions. There seemed to be a momentary truce, as thin as a thread stretching tautly between them, but still there, nonetheless.

He recognized the look in her eyes from that moment between them in the hut. Curiosity, trepidation, and longing flashed across her expression. The upward movement of her hand diverted his attention. As her fingers reached for his face, he realized her intention was to touch him. Fear shuddered through him, eclipsing his intrigue to know what had caused the temperance between them. She knew what she was doing, his face was the only skin he allowed to be exposed. He had taken countless precautions to ensure that no one could ever touch him, but those protections did little against Rey. He had always been powerless against her. Though he yearned for her touch, he no longer held the curiosity he did in the hut; this time he knew the consequences. They could share another vision, or worse, the bond could grow stronger. Knowing this, he did nothing to stop her. He longed for anything she would give him.

A pulsating energy sparked between them as her fingertips touched his skin. They both gasped, but neither pulled away. Her fingers softly trailed down the length of his cheek, caressing the path of the scar. Her scar. The energy between them hummed in anticipation. His eyes searched hers for a meaning behind this change, his question frozen on his lips. A consuming warmth radiated inside him, spilling into the bond. The storm crashing inside him momentarily subsided, and, for an instant, he felt as if all was right in the galaxy. He felt weightless, lightheaded, and euphoric. He felt like he was home. It was peaceful and calming, a feeling he had almost forgotten. Almost.

The light!

He jerked away defensively, breaking the connection between their touch. Her hand snapped back, but he caught her wrist between his gloved fingers. If she was frightened, he had not noticed. His attention was drawn to her palm. Her uninjured palm. His eyes trailed up from her hand to her arm, then to his own arm. There was not a single scratch. She must have observed the look of horror flash across his face, because she ripped her hand from his grasp to study it.

“The wounds... are gone,” she said in stunned confusion.
“What have you done?” He choked, the panic rising in his chest. He searched for the comforting familiarity of darkness, wrapping it around himself defensively. Still, he could feel the light where the darkness couldn’t reach. Her touch was beguiling; her light had seduced him from the darkness, and he had allowed it. Despite his master’s teachings, he had always felt the pull to the light. Now it was inside him, like an infection. Years of training, yet she had found the light within him with a single touch. What had she done? What had he done? They had… healed each other through their connection.

_Involuntary healing? It’s not possible!_

“Ben, how did we do that?” she asked in awe, but his mind was still reeling. His trembling lips could not articulate an answer. He dragged himself backward on his hands until his back hit a tree on her side of the connection. Her words confirmed she hadn’t done it herself. The bond had done it. The strength of their bond was growing to dangerous levels. Did it know no limits? At this rate, he would soon have no mental defenses against her. Theoretically, she would be capable of hearing and seeing _everything_ in his mind. He cursed the absence of a voice in his head. They needed guidance. They had to find a way to control it before it was beyond their control, before they lost themselves, before it allowed the light back in forever.

She knelt in front of him as he panted against the tree. “Ben?”

“What have you done? You healed yourself… with the light within me.” His voice was barely above a whisper between agitated breaths.

Her eyes were wide with wonder, brimming with tears. “I told you there’s still light in you. I felt it.”

“Don’t, Rey. Not now.” Kylo clenched his fists tightly beside his head.

What they had done – it was treachery. Snoke… Sidious would have punished him for it until he was barely breathing. He would punish _himself_ until he was barely breathing. He had enjoyed every second of it, as if he was not consumed by darkness, as if he was not a monster. There was no place for him in the light; it would destroy him. Yet he embraced it with the slightest touch from her. His skin felt too tight, there wasn’t enough oxygen in the galaxy to satisfy his lungs, he wanted to scream with everything in him until the emotions building inside him died away.

_You are sickening_, he told himself. _You are merely a fleeting shadow to the worthiness that is Vader._
His chest was tight, as he realized what voice his own had transformed into in his mind. The darkness flooding into his veins did little to ease the war inside him. He could feel the residual warmth of her light pulsing through him. He was terrified.

“Ben...” She reached for him, but he pushed her hand away.

“Haven't you ruined enough?” Somewhere in the darkness, he knew he was lashing out, he knew that his words had broken the fragile truce between them. But she had cracked something deep inside him, and he knew it had ruined him. “What have you done to me?”

Rey’s eyes darkened, and she lowered her hands. She stared at her palms for a moment, refusing to look at him. “I’m not sorry you hate me,” she growled, “for showing you the truth inside you.” Kylo wanted to demand how she could believe he hated her. After everything he had risked for her, after what he had done to his own master for her. He could never hate her; she continued to be his only reason to breathe. He wanted to say all those things, but that is not what he said to her as he clutched fearfully to the darkness.

“You don't give me many reasons not to hate you,” he said instead. Immediate regret ached in his chest. They were silent as she wrapped her arms around herself, turning her face so he wouldn’t see her tears. But he saw them and hated himself more for being the cause. Moving away from him, she returned to her silent vigil next to the dead creature.

The darkness he had grasped onto had faded when she spoke again. “I know you have no reason to help me, but can you please just bring Ben back.” He studied her face for a moment, his eyes softening at her pained expression. “The bat, I mean. If you can heal me, then you can heal him... you’re strong in the Force. Please, you’re the only other Force-user I know. Then I’ll leave you alone, I’ll never ask for anything again.”

“Ben is dead,” he said, his voice colder than he intended. Before she could argue, he continued, “The Force doesn't work that way. Death cannot be undone. Trust me, I wish it could be. Even if it were possible, to save a life requires a life, and there’s only one person I know that could have done it. In theory, he could have been healed if he were still alive but...” His voice faltered as he watched bitterness twist across her expression. There was a familiar darkness he sensed clouding her light again. It was suffocating even to him, and he had struggled with the darkness his entire life.

“So if you had joined the Resistance, he would still be alive?”
No, because you wouldn’t be.

“I never studied it, Rey. I learned basic techniques and read about it in a book. I have never been capable of healing anything beyond a flesh wound,” he said, but his mind supplied a memory of a time he had tried to save a life and failed. The memory was like ripping the scab off an old wound that would never heal. He swallowed the pain of remembering the past. “That was before I joined the First Order, and I haven’t tried it since. I don’t know how we healed you. I don’t think I want to know. Healing would require me to surrender myself to the light, and you know I can’t do that.”

“So, you could have saved him, but you care more about the darkness,” she spat. “Why shouldn’t I be surprised?”

Kylo could feel the familiar heat of anger igniting like embers under his skin. “Luke knew how to heal. How is it my fault that he taught you nothing? If you would have let me teach you, I would have...”

Jumping to her feet, she turned to him with blazing eyes. “No! You don’t get to make this my fault!”

“You’re making it mine!” he shouted back, pushing himself up to face her. “This was not me, or the First Order, or darkness that caused this. It is nature at its cruelest. It is fate. Everything and everyone dies. I didn’t do this; you can’t blame me for this.”

Her stare hardened. He recognized it; the darkness had a firm grasp of her again. There was a resignation that shuddered through him. Not only was the truce broken, but the confrontation would likely end with scarring wounds or words. “If I can’t blame you for this, I still have plenty to blame you for, Supreme Leader. Can I blame you for your father’s death?” Startled by the accusation that had seemingly appeared from nowhere, he staggered away from her, his eyes wide in shock. She had tempted him with her touch, exposed him to the light, ruined him. Then she had begged him for his help, and when she was denied, she moved in for the fatal blow, just as she had in the throne room.

“Can I blame you for Luke? For your mother slowly dying? Can I blame you for my friends having to waste away in hiding? For them not trusting me? For destroying my friendship with Poe because I was forced to kiss him to protect you? For ruining my friendship with Finn by forcing him to lie for me to protect us both? Can I blame you for looking so disgusted by the light that I regret ever touching you? Can I blame you for that?”

It took everything in him to hide the pain underneath the shell of darkness, to hide the waver of
emotion in his voice when he managed to rasp, “Can you?”

“Can I blame you for making me believe you were dead when you disappeared in a giant fireball?” she persisted. “You couldn’t have found a way to let me know you were alive? Do you have any idea what that did to me?”

“And how would I know that, Rey” he snapped. “I thought you wouldn’t care. And I wonder why I thought that?” He paused, waiting for her to make the connection, waiting for her to remember what she had done in darkness. Recognition flashed across her features. “Ah, I know, it was your answer when I asked what you wanted from me. I know you remember what you told me. Say it.” He sensed her regret shudder in the bond. “Say it.”

The darkness in her eyes faded. “I told you I wanted you to die,” she said, her tone soft and feeble.

“I hope your fighter explodes with you in it, that’s what I hope, Supreme Leader,’ is specifically what you said to me,” he added bitterly. “So, excuse me if I thought you would be ecstatic that the Force had given you exactly what you wanted. I figured showing up again would only dampen your celebration.”

“I didn’t mean it.” Her eyes reflected the truth of her admission, as did the bond, but it meant little to him as his emotions still unraveled from her earlier comments.

“Then will you finally answer what I asked you that night? What do you want from me? Beyond using me for my knowledge and training in the Force.” He studied her, intrigued, as she withdrew in upon herself. It was almost as if she was hiding something. She hated him, she only needed him for his power, so what other reason did she have to continue to interact with him?

“I want you to turn back to the light,” she said softly after a moment, her inner conflict still raging. Kylo sensed that there was something… something else she didn’t want him to know. He had the good sense to recognize she would never tell him, and he couldn’t bear looking into her eyes anymore.

“Then you would be better off hoping for that explosion,” he said sarcastically. He didn’t know how to shut the connection by sheer will, but he would certainly try. His fingers itched to damage something.

“You’re insufferable!” she shouted, the darkness returning to her eyes. He refused to stay and
watch the connection devolve further. Pivoting on his heels, he swiftly walked away from her.

“I don't tell you the comforting lies you wish to hear, as your friends do. I call you on your delusions,” he retorted without looking back. “If that makes me insufferable, then so be it.”

“Maybe someone should call you on your delusions!”

Kylo hummed dismissively. “Be my guest, sweetheart.”

“Stop that!” she demanded behind him, as if she had the power to demand anything from him. It irritated him that she dared command him after choosing not to join him. It irritated him further that what he had said sounded too much like his father, but he covered his disdain with a wry smirk. Not that it mattered when she couldn’t see his face. He swallowed his irritation as he imagined the indignant expression on her face. It was too easy to wield sarcasm and derision as a defensive shield against her destabilizing words. She was so reactive; she willingly relinquished any superiority she held over the argument.

Kylo could have continued to instigate a fight, but he wasn’t his father. He was tired of the fighting. “You should go. Trust me, if there’s one of those panthers, there are others.”

“Finn! Rose!” she gasped.

Kylo had a habit of saying things around her without thinking it through first; he knew that. Words often left his tongue with an unintended meaning, or were unintended entirely. She had a way of eroding the very foundation he stood upon. Perhaps that was why he didn’t think twice about the suggestion, “You might want to break your Jedi mind trick first...”

He should have known, as the darkness flooded into the bond, the mistake he had made. Her voice grew cold. “You were spying on me!”

Closing his own eyes, he exhaled slowly. “You brought me here. You sought out the abilities in my mind, after I asked you not to use our bond, so you could betray your friend’s trust. Don’t forget that.” Kylo may not have been facing her, but he felt her approach from behind him. He could sense her intention. Before she could shove him, to force him to look at her, he pivoted out of the way. Rey fell forward into the undergrowth. It must have been her own form of retaliation that she didn’t catch herself with the Force when she fell. It worked.
Swallowing heavily, he stepped forward and offered his gloved hand. She knocked his hand away in spite and jumped to her feet. “I don't need your help! I can take care of myself!”

Working his jaw, he swallowed his damaged pride. “Clearly,” he sneered, refusing to withdraw his hand as he nodded in the direction of the panther. The flash of metal at her hip reminded him of what he needed before he could return to his side of the galaxy.

“I had no weapon; I was waiting for it to get closer so I could defend myself,” she snapped back. He studied her carefully to determine if she would use the weapon. Evidently, there would be no gratitude from her for his help with the beast.

“You're welcome,” he said, ignoring her assertion, which only sparked more fury in her fierce eyes.

If she was prepared to battle again, through words or weapons, then he would have the upper hand. He cleared his throat, his hand outstretched persistently. She raised her eyebrow. “What do you want from me!”

“My lightsaber, sweetheart,” he sighed, “or do you expect to steal this one as well?” There was a flash of contrition in her eyes, but then they flared with ferocity again. She shoved the hilt into his chest.

“You don’t get to call me ‘sweetheart,’ not after trying to kill me on Crait! I’ll never be yours!”

Kylo stilled, swallowing his immediate desire to lash out again. He tried to feign that haughty indifference once more. “Not just you, Jedi, the entire Resistance. Every single one of those anarchists. I would have ended the war right there.”

“It wouldn’t have been over,” she snarled back, “you would have had to burn down every last world, kill every last lifeform in the whole galaxy until there was no one left to fight back.”

“No, it would have been over,” he said as he met her furious glare. “I had no intention of staying the Supreme Leader,” without you, he didn’t add. “If everyone who had betrayed me was gone, then it would have been over, for me. I brought Hux with me to avoid friendly fire, so I could complete my only purpose since I burned down Luke’s temple. With the Resistance and Jedi dead, Hux wouldn’t need me anymore; he would have staged a coup. I would have never left Crait. I never intended to leave Crait.” As his voice wavered, he turned away before she could see the pain.
twisting through him.

“So what,” she cried, her voice wavering with emotion. “You would have died a murderer.”

“And you would have died a traitor.” He was thankful his back was to her, so she could imagine a sardonic smile spreading across his lips rather than pained scowl of reality.

“If you truly would have killed me on Crait, then why did you save my nothing life just now!” she demanded. He should have considered she would know exactly how to rip open every raw wound on his soul.

“Why did you spare mine on the Supremacy?” he growled through clenched teeth, turning to face her. “I begged for you to stay with me. But instead of just rejecting me, or begging me to join you, you said nothing! You tried to kill me instead. You had your chance when I was unconscious on the floor. You could have finished me with my own weapon. Why did you try to kill me, then spare my life just to leave me for dead?”

Something different was blooming in her eyes. She studied his eyes closely, for what, he wasn’t certain. He chastised himself for laying his wounds bare before her. He knew what she could do to him; he knew it was safer to keep her at arm’s length as he had learned to do with everyone else, but for some reason, his traitorous heart wouldn’t shut her out. “I believed that your life was not mine to take,” she replied calmly. “I had to save my friends, and I knew that you would have never let me go. I grabbed my lightsaber to leave, not to hurt you. And I didn’t leave you for dead; you made your choice to stay, I just left you to it. Now give me an honest answer.”

His lips twitched as he sensed the Force vibrating around him. He could have left her without an answer. He could have won.
Chapter End Notes

Death

Death of an animal

Jealousy

Both Rey and Kylo express jealous thoughts
Leia's Revelation

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story is 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
When Finn had asked Rose if she needed help with cataloging the inventory collected from the old base, she immediately put him to work with the weaponry. He knew why, of course, though she wouldn’t say it aloud. He’d had extensive training. Finn had spoken often of the academy, to remind her of what he was, but for some reason, it never seemed to bother her. The First Order had killed her family and he had been one of them when it happened, but she treated him like some hero.

And she’d said yes. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. It still didn’t seem real. Nothing had changed between them; there was no awkwardness or detachment as he had feared. They hadn’t told anyone, except Rey, of course. Rey had been happy for them, but there was something behind her offer of congratulations. Rose believed it was residual heartbreak from the fight with her boyfriend, but Finn knew better. Though she refused to be honest with him, he saw her reaction to the death of that bat, he knew her mind was on Kylo Ren. Her feelings were not those meant for an enemy, and it terrified him. He had given Rey an ultimatum: she had three days to kill Kylo…or he would. Once that creature was gone, then maybe he could have the old Rey back.

Then the three of them could be a family. Rey had looked past what he once was, and now Rose had as well. It was different, he thought, not only befriending a former Stormtrooper, but marrying one. They hadn’t told the rest of the Resistance yet, but Finn wondered what would happen when they did. Would they look at her differently for vowing eternity to someone like him? Would she change her mind? Finn knew Rose; he knew she wouldn’t, but he couldn’t help adding it to his list of fears. The man who wanted to run away feared losing the people he loved. He feared their death, leaving him because he was not good enough, and losing them to murderous dark warriors. In three days, one of those problems would be solved permanently.

“I hate the First Order. I hope every single one of them dies a slow, fiery death and then burns in Hell for all eternity,” Rose whispered as she tinkered with an outdated holopad they had recovered from the dilapidated base.

Finn paused his inspection of a defective blaster. “You know I was one of them, right?” Rose looked positively contrite, abandoning the holopad to grasp his hands in her much smaller ones.

“You're not, Finn,” she assured him. “You refused to be like them. They made our colony, my family, into slaves. You... you would never do that.”

“I chose not to kill the villagers on Tuanul, but, Rose, I wasn't only in sanitation. I had other missions for the Order. I was put in executioner rotation, and had I been ordered to carry out executions, I would have had to do it. I would have done it to save my own life. I went through
cadet training with many of those troopers; I killed with them in simulations. They had no families, either, and had no choice but to fight for the only cause they have ever known. Many of them are no different than me, except they don't have a Resistance pilot to help them escape. I wasn't different, Rose; I was lucky.”

Finn wondered if this was the moment she saw him for what he truly was. Rose rocked back in her seat, trying to find an option that would align with both of their beliefs, but he knew she could find no way to save the wayward souls of his old training buddies.

Rose squeezed his hand tighter in support. “When Poe Dameron was on that ship, tortured for information, no other trooper tried to help him; just you, Finn.”

“I needed to escape before they discovered I didn’t fire my blaster; I needed a pilot,” he said, eyes downcast on the blaster even though his hands hesitated in their work.

“You’re different,” she reasoned, “even if you don't realize it, yet.” Finn wanted to argue that she didn’t realize it yet, but he was different. Not a good different. Although he had fought for the Resistance, defeating his former troopers when the battle necessitated it, he didn’t know what would happen if the Resistance launched an attack and he was asked to kill stormtroopers who were not actively trying to kill him. Sure, he had helped with Starkiller, but he wouldn’t have had the guts to blow it up. He couldn’t actively press the trigger that ended defenseless troopers' lives. Would they expect him to wield the weapon that judged them for their crimes, even if he knew them, even if they begged for forgiveness?

When he looked up at Rose, he might as well have spoken a thousand words in his silence, because she seemed to know exactly what he was thinking. “I understand, Finn, I do, but you know we have to kill them when it comes down to it, even if that means executing them. It is our lives or theirs. You know that, don't you?”

“Yes,” he snapped, though his face instantly softened after he realized how harsh he had sounded. “I'm sorry, Rose. I'm not upset with you.” He turned his attention back to the blaster, his brows furrowed in thought.

“I love you,” she said, hoping to brighten his mood, return him to the uncomplicated bliss in the jungle. Finn hummed, lost in thought as he inspected the defective blaster. There was so much he wished she would understand about him, but he wouldn’t say it for fear she would look at him as a monster. He knew his sullen distress concerned her. He knew she was living in bliss after he had asked her to spend the rest of her life with him, and she wondered why he wasn’t as well. He was, of course, but the war weighed heavily on his mind. Everything was just so complicated.
“I said 'I love you,'” she repeated, smiling when his eyes met hers.

The tense rigidity in his body fell away for a moment, and he smiled devotedly, “I love you, too.” He turned back to his work and the smile faded, a shadow returning to his heart. Everything about him was drawn and weary in agitation. Rose may not have been Force-sensitive, she couldn't read other's emotions at will, but she had come to know him better than anyone else. He knew she could sense it. He couldn’t wait until the war was over, when complications like his past and Rey’s connection to Kylo Ren would be a distant memory. He couldn’t wait until all he had to worry about was his speech or whether his shoes were on the right feet or making sure Poe didn’t drink too much at the wedding. Finn yearned for the normalcy of “after” on the distant horizon.

“Finn...” She began but was interrupted by the general's protocol droid, who turned to address Finn.

“Greetings, my name is C-3P0, Human-Cyborg relations. General Organa has requested your company.”

Finn's skin grew clammy, and his heart stuttered. This was it. He set down the blaster he was repairing and straightened to his full height. Rose's eyes grew wide as she noticed the finality in his. “I love you,” he whispered. “That's all that matters.”

He turned away from her, following faithfully behind the golden droid. There was only one reason the general would want to speak with him – she suspected the secret he was keeping. If there was proof of his surreptitious silence, then he was presumably being led to his fate. If it was merely a suspicion, he would have to choose between protecting the woman whom he had gone back to the First Order to save and the woman who had promised him eternity and had given him a purpose and belonging. He would gladly fall to a monster's red blade for either of them. He refused to make it a decision between Rey and Rose - the two people he loved most in the galaxy - because it wasn't. It was the decision between the two parts of Rey. It was the part of Rey that was a Force-user bonded to another, very evil Force-user, and the part that was a warrior who fought for the Resistance – a choice between what Rey thought she wanted and what was best for her.

Finn was no fool. He knew the struggles Rey had likely suffered on Jakku. Though she did not confide in him about them, he knew he had found a kindred spirit in her. She had no parents, and neither did he. Both hoped their parents would one day come back for them; both were both disappointed. He knew how it felt as he steered his speeder into the business end of that battering ram cannon, finding the purpose he had sought his entire life, willing to give his life for the people around him. It was the first time in his life he hadn't wanted to run; he finally had a cause he truly believed was worth dying for.

Rey had found the Force. Coming from nothing, it made her feel important. She had searched for
her belonging with Luke, but, from what he could gather, it did not go as planned. It couldn't have if she left him in an attempt to turn the monster instead, who just so happened to be the only other practicing Force user she'd had contact with. It wouldn't be too far of a reach to believe that the master of the Knights of Ren had told her exactly what she wanted to hear, promising her belonging and purpose in an attempt to lure her to Snoke. Rey in her naïvete had believed him.

Finn couldn't understand how she had the desire to do anything but drive her weapon through the beast after what he had done to her, Poe, and Han – as well as Finn himself. Perhaps the creature convinced her that he was still Ben Solo, that she could return him to his mother, taking advantage of an abandoned child's empathy of fixing a broken family. She barely survived the last encounter, yet Finn knew she was still stubbornly holding onto hope that the monster could be saved. She had spent her life fixing things, after all, but Finn had seen what Kylo Ren could do. He knew evil couldn't be fixed.

Finn knew Rey had not been alone in the jungle. The Supreme Leader, or at least his Force apparition – or however their connection worked – had been on that bluff overlooking where he and Rose had celebrated unawares; he was certain of it. As he walked into that clearing, he could *smell* the mixture of ozone and life-support systems he had come to know on the *Finalizer*, as well as plasma-burned flesh. It had corrupted the air around them like a stain. There was something else, something... not evil in and of itself, but it had haunted his nightmares nonetheless. Every sight, smell, and sound of his last moments on Starkiller – as the creature bore down on him with his fiery lightsaber while he was backed into a tree – were burned forever into his memory. The smell of *him* was burned into his memory. And Finn had no doubt the monster had been there, watching them.

What they had been doing there, together, Finn didn't know, nor would Rey ever grant him an honest answer, but he had reached his breaking point. He wished he knew the man with ties to the Resistance that Rey had feelings for, so then maybe he could talk some sense into her about her connection to the Supreme Leader. She was not only putting herself at risk, but Rose and everyone else he cared about as well. He hoped she would do the right thing and kill their greatest adversary, but he was no fool. If she was going to continue to maintain their connection in secret, then Finn would do what was right. He had given her three days, but they were running out of time. Even if it meant earning her hatred, he would kill Kylo Ren, because he loved her that much. The only problem was, now the general could force his hand. If that happened, his only regret would be that she wouldn't have a chance to make the right choice on her own.

“You... you asked to speak with me, General?” Finn stuttered as he entered the makeshift communications room. Poe Dameron stood in the corner, arms crossed, staring at the spot on the floor he was scuffing with his boot. Finn wasn't the best at reading people, but when Poe did not look up to greet him, it increased the growing panic churning in his gut.

“Yes, please come in.” Leia was all business, which did nothing to settle Finn's nerves. He fidgeted anxiously as she concentrated on a holomap at the center table, the perfect manifestation of what a leader should be. “How are you, Finn?”
It was a question he hadn't been expecting. “You're a traitor” or "You're being detained as a spy” were higher up on his list of expectations of the accusations they would assuredly level against him. He was a defector from the First Order, after all. What reason did they have to believe him when they discovered he had been complicit in hiding the truth concerning the Supreme Leader? “I'm, uh, I'm fine; everything’s fine, General. You?”

“Well, since you asked, I might as well be blunt about it – I'm dying.” That definitely wasn’t what he had been expecting. Finn noticed the difference in her now as he looked upon her with a new lens. Her hands were splayed on the table, not so much to provide her a more adequate view of the holomap as he'd first presumed, but to yield enough leverage to support the weight of her failing body. Looking closer, he could see the exhaustion on her features, the shallowness of her breath, the faint bluish hue of her sweat-glazed skin. Realistically, he had known she was weakening, but to see the physical confirmation with his own eyes left no room for denial. It wasn't until this moment that the consequences finally sank in; their general wasn't just sick or injured or heartbroken. The strongest woman he had ever met—and he had met three incredibly strong women – was actually going to die.

“Was it the Raddus,” he found himself asking, “when Ren –”

“It was not my son, I felt his reservations in completing his mission through our bond,” she answered, not unkindly, the woman's noble upbringing evident in her diplomatic response. “But it was one of his squadmen.”

Poe, however, was less tactful. “Too bad he didn't have such 'reservations' about his father.” Leia cleared her throat and turned to the colonel. Finn could not see the look in her eyes as she faced away from him, but, judging by Poe's contrite expression, it must have been positively withering.

“To answer your question, Finn, yes, the failing of my body is partly due to the events aboard the Raddus... and the necessity for me to prematurely cease medical care to assist in the evacuations. Hypoxia, it seems, destroyed my most vital systems beyond repair. The droids have branded me with multiple organ failure. It is only a matter of time – something I am quickly running out of.” He sputtered for a moment in shock, searching for the right words to say, before she silenced him with a raised hand. “No need for platitudes; that's not why you're here.”

The tightness in Finn's throat released enough for him to form words. This was it; this was the moment it all came crashing down on him…and Rey. He was well aware of the consequences – death was a very real possibility, imprisonment or exile if he were lucky – and he would accept them without hesitation, as long as they recognized Rose's innocence. “Why am I here?”
“Don't look so despondent, Finn.” Leia studied him for a moment, a covert look in her eye. “It's nothing like that. I have asked Poe to take over the responsibilities of general. He will need a new colonel, someone with bravery, military experience, and, most importantly, someone he trusts – both in the war room and on the battlefield.”

“And I,” Poe cut in, pushing himself off the wall, “chose you.”

Finn stared at them both, waiting for them to continue, because, clearly, there had to be a "however." Except, they were both quiet, their eyes meeting his expectantly. “I don't know what to say.”

“Say yes,” the incumbent general said with a shrug as if it were that simple.

This, however, was not a simple answer for Finn. Yes, he would give his life for the cause in a heartbeat, but could he accept such a high-ranking position if he was deceiving them in the same breath. “Why would you trust me? I used to be with the First Order, and I wasn't even an officer at that. Why me?”

Poe smiled as if it were the easiest decision in the galaxy. “You saved my life, you brought Beebee-Ate back to me and the map to the Resistance, you willingly infiltrated Starkiller and the Supremacy, you gave us insider information, and you almost sacrificed your own life for the good of the Resistance... twice. Why wouldn't I want you to be my colonel?”

Finn returned the smile, though his gut still churned with apprehension. He hoped with everything inside him that Rey made the right choice, because Poe was taking a risk on him, and he wanted more than anything not to let the man down. “It would be an honor.”

“Great, buddy,” Poe clapped his friend on the back, a relief settling over his features. Finn felt closer to his friend for believing in him when he had every reason not to. Maybe his role at the First Order wouldn't haunt him forever.

“If you don't mind,” Leia interrupted. “Let's get started.”

Poe shared a long look with Leia, nodded, then tapped the table to call up a holo. “I'll introduce you to our allies.”
“Allies?” Finn asked, the apprehension inexplicably building inside him. The last he had heard, they hadn't had any allies. Was he only learning now that he had been promoted?

“Yes, but this is confidential. This alliance is our last hope, and the identity of our allies does not leave this room, understood?” Finn groaned at the idea of more secrets. Poe expanded the holo, and a large, hideous creature slithered into view, Finn had seen them in history holos, had heard the stories of their depravity. Of the thousand thoughts exploding into his mind, he focused on one terrifying thought – if they were truly committed to helping the Resistance, what were the Hutts receiving in return?
Chapter End Notes

Mention of Leia's impending death
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Rey sat at the base of an ancient, damaged tree, one of Luke’s Jedi texts opened in her lap. She had been excited with her newfound skill, regrettably thanks to her intolerable bond partner. But the more she read, the more she feared that the Jedi dogma was not for her. It was as disappointing as Luke had been as a teacher. Somehow, she couldn’t reconcile the difference between the reality she experienced and the fantastical legends she had heard. How had that cynical old man been the Master Jedi that she had believed in? How could an Order immersed in the light side of the Force be so rigid and radical about their beliefs?

She sighed in frustration.

Her eyes closed as she lost herself in the warmth of the sun on her face. She imagined she was back on Jakku, the sun much harsher, but a comforting presence all the same. There would be no friends to disappoint, no war that hinged its hope on her "gift," no enemy to share a confusing connection with. They would all still be out there, of course, but she wouldn’t be a part of it. She would be alone, but had that truly ever changed?

Her eyes flickered open at the sound of faraway screech, breaking her reverie, and part of her expected to see an endless expanse of sand. A dry ache tightened in her throat as her eyes settled on an endless expanse of trees instead. She was still on Barkhesh, a disappointment to everyone, and confused as ever. She shut her eyes again.

She should have lied to Finn and Rose, found any reasonable excuse to lure them from the rainforest and those creatures. It was a mistake to show them its body. They hadn’t bothered to challenge what she had been doing in the forest, observing them. But they did ask how she had killed the beast, alone, without a weapon. It was a question she was not prepared to answer. She had lied confidently enough, but she noticed the shadow pass over Finn’s face and the distrust in his eyes. He knew a large stick had not created that hole through the panther. Had Finn recognized the burn patterns? Or was it the lack of blood around the wound that gave it away?

Finn had immediately distanced himself from her. Even as she had embraced them and expressed her happiness for their commitment to each other—which was true, despite her own selfish longing– his eyes stared through her. His thoughts were somewhere else. She had been all too aware of what he was contemplating. He had his suspicions. He knew she had not been in the forest alone. And she knew they had reached an impasse when he had asked Rose to meet him back at the temple. Their conversation replayed over and over in her mind.

“I need to talk to you,” he had told her. The kindness, the brightness in his eyes was missing. She had been terrified, convinced that he would force her to tell him about Kylo. Maybe she should have. “Listen, Rey, I know I promised you that I wouldn’t tell anyone about your bond, because
you needed time. But Poe came to me. He has no proof yet, but he knows. He thought he heard a
man’s voice in your room. I didn’t tell him, but it’s only a matter of time before he figures out
what’s happening. You’ve changed, Rey, and I don’t know what to believe anymore. I think you’re
losing control over whatever this is. You need to end this. Now. You have three days to kill him.
I’ll be forced to tell Poe everything I know. I can’t lie for you. This puts the entire Resistance…
everyone I care about – including you – at risk. If you think you can’t do it, say the word, and I
will do it for you.” He wrapped her tightly in an embrace, assuring her that she always had his
support. But he hadn’t waited for a response. He cared for her, but he had given her an ultimatum.

And he was right. She had lost control, she knew that. Kylo had been in the forest, spying on her,
and she had been clueless. He had seen what she had done, had heard every word that she had said.
Most concerning, he had rendered himself defenseless to save her life. When she asked him why he
saved her, his words flipped the axis of her entire world.

“Maybe you were wrong,” he had told her, before disappearing across the galaxy. “Maybe...
someone would be destroyed by your death.”

His words tormented her more than had he said nothing. How could the man who desired to kill
her be “destroyed” by her death? It made no sense. None of it did. Kylo saved her. He could have
allowed that creature to kill her, and the bond would have ended. He could have been free. Yet he
trusted her with his weapon instead. Why? What did he gain? He saved her from Snoke because he
needed her help, needed someone to blame. But this was different. He could have gotten what he
wanted. There had to be a reason. Because he couldn’t...

Her eyes flickered open as she sensed the familiar vibration of his presence in the Force. Despite
how their last connection ended, and her overwhelming fear of the ultimatum she refused to
contemplate, she felt herself grin when she sensed him.

Kylo sat at a small circular table, playing a holographic game with his droid. The gameboard had a
circular white space in the center, surrounded by two rings of alternating black and white spaces.
The first ring had twelve spaces that emanated from the center like rays of the sun. It was
surrounded by the second ring with the same number of spaces, only wide where the spaces of the
first ring were long. These spaces completed each ray, only they were opposite in color of the first
ring. There were twenty-five spaces in total. There were monstrous holographic creatures on the
board, controlled by small buttons on a control panel at each side of the table.

There were twenty-five buttons in total. The first twenty-four buttons were split evenly for each
monster on the table; eight for attack, defense, and monster selection. The final button was to roll a
holographic die to determine the strength of a particular attack or defense. Rey had seen the same
game on the Millennium Falcon; Dejarik. Finn had made the mistake of challenging Chewbacca to
a game. Rey knew enough to understand that the purpose of the game was to destroy the other
player’s monsters. She knew there were typically eight monsters on the board – four monsters each
– but this game had already begun. There were only four monsters.

There was a large, blue, hunch-backed creature with hands that dragged on the ground and a long, red arthropod with yellow eyes that she assumed belonged to the droid. They were labeled on the screen as a Mantellian Savrip and a K’lor’slug, respectively. The creatures Kylo controlled looked like they depended more on agility than brute force, which Rey found ironic, considering Kylo’s tactics on the battlefield. The first of his monsters was blue with a trunk-like snout like a Toydarian and its body looked almost skeletal in appearance, with long hands like talons. It was labeled Grimtaash the Molator. His other monster was yellow, brown, and red. It stood tall with a primitive staff in its hands. It was labeled a Monnok. The creatures that had been defeated flashed on the screen; the Ghhhk, the Houkix, the Kintan Strider, and the Ng’ok.

After spending hours watching Finn and Chewbacca play, Rey had learned that each monster typically had a different strength, so their numbers in attack, defense, and movement varied. Based upon the readings of their screens, however, each monster had a reading of “two” for their statistics. Perhaps it was to make the game easier for beginners, or because he preferred battles where the playing field was even. Rey wondered if he preferred a game that relied more heavily on tactics. Regardless of his reason, Kylo was using his turns to flank his opponent, moving both of his monsters, rather than focusing on one monster at a time as she had seen her friends do.

Kylo ignored her as he focused on the game, but she knew he had felt her; his entire posture had changed the moment the connection opened. Blue had seen her as well, answering whether or not they would be visible to others in their environment now that the bond had grown stronger. The droid looked back and forth between Rey and her bondmate, but he let the matter drop when Kylo asked him to “focus on the game, and only on the game.” Kylo’s hands weren’t clenched, his body wasn’t rigid, his scowl hadn’t deepened. He wasn’t angry, but he had curled in upon himself slightly as if he were protecting himself. She wondered if he feared physical or emotional pain.

There were questions she wanted answered, of course, but they were questions he clearly had no intention of answering. Did you lie, she wanted to ask him, or would my death destroy you like you said? What she did know in that moment was, as much as she loved her best friend, she couldn’t do what he demanded. She imagined firing a weapon at the man as he played a game his father played, the ghost of a smile on his lips as he explained the rules regarding a “fork” to the droid he had saved. It was moments like this when she could see the light – the humanity – in him. Kylo might have commanded the monsters with ease, but he wasn’t one of them as her friends believed he was.

She watched quietly as Kylo made an impulsive move, moving his Malator away from the protection of his Monnok. The droid moved his Savrip away from where the K’lor’slug had blocked it, confident in his Savrip’s ability to destroy the Molator. Kylo, however, looked pleased, as if the droid had stepped into a trap. They both rolled, and Blue easily won by over six points. The Savrip lifted the skeletal body of the Molator and snapped its spine in two. The Savrip dropped the body of the Molator in a heap at its feet as it roared in triumph.
Blue let out his own screech of triumph, but paused as he noticed the lack of disappointment on the man’s face. With growing suspicion, the droid asked him why he had left the Molator to be killed. “That’s the point, Blue,” Kylo explained plainly to the droid, “It was a distraction, a trap. I sacrificed the Molator to draw out the Savrip. You were more focused on killing the Molator than protecting your most valuable piece. It’s endgame now. I can still win without my Molator, but without your Savrip…” Kylo moved his Monnok in to quickly attack the now unguarded Savrip. They both rolled, but neither were surprised by the outcome. The Monnok stepped around the Savrip, using the staff to strangle the creature from behind. After a moment of disturbing gurgling sounds, the Savrip fell dramatically as the Monnok celebrated.

The two final monsters moved to the center white space of the board. The statistics of the monsters changed on the screen now that it had reached endgame, restoring their ratings to what Rey had seen at the holotable on the Millennium Falcon. It seemed that the monster’s ratings did matter in this game, but only in the final round. It changed the strategy of the entire game. The K’lor’slug had lower ratings in both attack and defense, so Blue’s loss was inevitable. They both rolled and the Monnok thrust its staff against the K’lor’slug’s long neck with force, breaking it instantly.

Kylo had won.

It was a different side of Kylo than she had seen before; a more strategic, less impulsive side. It made her question how impulsive the man truly was. His uncontrolled emotions made him seem reactionary, but what if he was more calculating than she had presumed? What if his impulsive moves had only seemed impulsive because she had not seen them for what they were? After what had happened in the jungle, her previous beliefs about him didn’t make sense.

*What if I was wrong about you?*

Kylo turned to her then, as if he had heard her. It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that he had, indeed, heard it. There was an indescribable ache in her chest that she knew was not her own. His eyes met hers, and it was impossible not to see the man from the hut, from Kamino, from the other day in her room with the Rammahgon. His lips parted as if he would finally acknowledge she was there, but his comlink stopped him.

“Supreme Leader,” Hux snarled across the channel, “The strategy meeting was set for oh-six-hundred hours Galactic Standard Time, was it not, because the other officers and I have been waiting for the past – ”

“Not now! I’m busy,” Kylo growled back.
“With all due respect, should we not focus on the movement and disposition of our forces and save our energy for when we encounter the Resis –” He switched off the comlink.

He looked away, the apple of his throat bobbing as he swallowed his fear. It paled in comparison to her own fear rising in her chest. “Where are you going, Ben? What battle are you preparing for?”

“Rey, I –”

“Do you know where I am?” she demanded.

He stood. His eyes looked pained, as if this was what he had been expecting all along. “Would it matter if I did?”

Her bondmate was excellent at deflection, but she was having none of it. He might win at a Dejarik game, but she knew this game and she would beat him at it. “Say it, Ben. Tell me the truth. Honesty is so important to you, isn’t it?” Her voice wavered as she heaved uneven breaths. “Where am I?”

Kylo chewed the word before giving life to it, doing more damage than she could have imagined. “Barkhesh.”

He had known, likely by something she had done. She had put the entire Resistance at risk. "How long have you known?” she cried in anger. He sighed, closing his eyes, as if bracing himself for what was to come.

"The whole time,” he replied quietly. Her blood was igniting with rage under her skin, feeding the darkness that crashed through her veins as if she’d opened a spout full throttle.

No, that's impossible.

"How? How could I not?" He snapped, the derision piercing his words. He stormed back and forth, fading from his quarters to the forest floor and back again, gesturing wildly. "That bed you sleep on? It’s a sacrificial altar. Want to know where they have those? Ancient temples. And that plant by your bed? It’s a Century Flower found on Outer Rim rainforest planets. Fewer than .1% of planets are forest or jungle planets, Rey. Even fewer are forest or jungle planets in the Outer Rim. How many planets have rainforests and temples and are sparsely habited enough for the Resistance to hide there? Not many. Do you know how many rainforest planets in the Outer Rim have temples, and a Rebel base that your own FN-2187 has first-hand knowledge of...because he had been sent on a mission there...to scout for Resistance activity...at said base...by yours truly? One.”

His chest heaved in his frenzy, his body was tense with agitation as he continued to pace. “Ah, he didn’t tell you how he knew of this planet? He was one of our top cadets; he went on several missions for us, though he seemed utterly incapable of handling native wildlife. Ask him to tell you the story of the Kowakian monkey-lizard or the creature from GUHL-JO387O. He should have known I would not forget the worlds to which he was deployed, especially not after his infamous...departure from our army. And the others, especially my mother, should have known that I would search any planet that had a known rebel base or was sympathetic to the Rebellion during the war. There are only a handful of members left, and I know every rebel base two of your members have visited. It was an easy process of elimination.”

His eyes were dark and pained, his entire body vibrating in his feverish outburst. Kylo never ceased to amaze her. For all his misguided ideals, he was incredibly intelligent and observant. He would have made an incredible leader – a Senator like his mother – if he hadn’t chosen darkness. “If that isn’t enough, I am certain I could have researched the symbols all over the stone walls in your room – written in a very distinct ancient language – if I really needed confirmation. But Rey, even if you didn’t expect me to see those things early on, how could you honestly be surprised that I knew where you were after everything that happened? You knew I saw that native species of panther and the bat in the jungle. You didn’t think that would be a clue to your whereabouts? What about the other night you kissed the pilot? I know you could see part of my sky. Did you believe I couldn’t see yours? You weren’t worried I could determine your location in relation to the rest of the galaxy? Your brightest star is Mustafar's star; if I knew nothing else, I would still be able to pinpoint the right sector. What do you want from me? Did you believe me a fool? If you wanted to keep the location of the Resistance a secret, you didn’t take any precautions.”

Rey was shaking in her own fury by the time he finished. “It doesn’t matter how naïve I was; I don’t care – you knew where we were and let me keep my friends in danger this whole time.”

"Were they in danger, Rey?" he countered in that condescending voice that made her want to hit him with something heavy. “Yes, I have known where you were the entire time, but nothing has happened to you or your friends. I could have leveled that entire planet if I wanted. I could have used our bond to help the First Order as you try to use it for the Resistance. Not only did I not act on my knowledge, I withheld information from the First Order to keep you safe!”

“Keep me safe?” Was he insane? She knew Kylo had some irrational beliefs, but this one was
beyond logic. “You’ve set course to kill me and my friends. That's not keeping me safe, Ben.”

He shook his head emphatically, pinning her with his pleading eyes. “I didn't.”

“Congratulations, Supreme Leader, you outsmarted us all. You're the best liar in the galaxy –”

“I never lied to you,” he said, his jaw tight with growing anger. He had no reason to be angry; he was the liar.

“But if you knew where I was, why did you wait this long, why didn't you come for me right after Crait? Why didn't you kill me before I –”

“You know why I didn't!” Kylo shouted, slamming a fist against the wall.

“Because you wanted me to suffer more–”

“Because I had no intention of intercepting the Resistance on Barkhesh!” There was something more than truth in his eyes. Fear. The admission terrified him. It was as if he had only just realized his true intentions… his intentions of not chasing after his one enemy.

“But you said –”

Kylo sat back down at Dejarik table, pressing buttons, refusing to look at her. “I've set up particular fail-safes. Is the Resistance in danger, Rey? I think you know the truth. The First Order is no closer to the Resistance now than they were after you disappeared off Crait. It's just another reason why I... can't... leave.”

“Why didn't you tell me?” Part of her longed for him to give her a reason to believe him, while the other part hoped he confirmed what everyone else claimed about him. “I trusted you,” she whispered.

“No, you didn't trust me. That's why I didn't tell you.” He may not have lied to her, but his eyes were guarded; there was something else he wasn’t saying.
She’d had enough of his secrets. “If you want me to trust you, give me a reason to.” Unfortunately, Kylo never had the opportunity to answer. Rey watched as the blastdoor to his quarters slid open.

“Ren!” The general barged into the room as she was jolted back across the galaxy.

Chapter End Notes

Mild violence
Dejarik monsters are killed in a game
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Rey flipped through the pages of Luke’s text as she made her way down the corridor. She only glanced up as she heard boots echoing down the hall. Finn had a pack slung over his shoulder and a blaster on his hip. After her disturbing vision, the sight of her friend alive was always a relief, but the thought that his life was in danger terrified her. She smiled at him, but it faded as he stared past her, around her, anywhere but in her eyes. As she approached him, her stomach dropped in anticipation. She purposely blocked his path, forcing him to look at her.

“What, Rey?” he sighed. His body was turned away from her, prepared for a quick escape. She knew the tension between them was as toxic to him as it was to her. But she saw no weakness on his hardened features – something she was unaccustomed to observing in her best friend. “Did you kill him yet?”

Kylo had kept a secret from her, a secret that could have put her friends’ lives at risk. She had no reason to trust him and every reason to kill him. But she couldn’t. No matter how angry she was with him, she couldn’t do it. It was more than just weakness; she couldn’t allow her friends to do it, either.

*Please don’t do this. Please don’t make me choose.*

She shook her head dejectedly. “No, but I…”

“Then I’ve said my piece, and there is nothing more to say,” Finn replied curtly. His eyes were unyielding, and she saw little of the man who was the closest thing to family that she had. He attempted to step around her, but she blocked him again.

“Where are you going?” Her tone was plaintive, desperation shuddering through her voice. She felt like she was losing him, and it was all her fault because she refused to choose. Her heart ached with the familiarity of being left behind by someone she loved. She couldn’t stand him leaving when he was angry with her.

“We are heading off-world,” he replied quickly. “We need to meet with... our allies, Rey. Leia believes if we go to them in person, they may be able to help with ships. We’re stuck on a planet with few supplies, no fighters, and barely enough people to call this a Resistance. We have no chance against... the First Order without them.”
“You’re taking the _Falcon._” It was an observation, not a question. She knew the light freighter was not hers, but she had begun to feel a possessiveness toward the old thing. It had been Han’s, it was her last connection to Luke, and eventually Leia as well. She had imagined herself and Chewbacca bringing Kylo home in it one day. Even if she could never trust him, even if she _hated_ him, she couldn’t allow Leia’s son to die. That meant she only had two more days to convince him to come home. What if she needed to go to him?

“Yes. It’s the only ship we have,” he whispered. It was the absolute worst time to leave the rest of the Resistance stranded there. What if Kylo had lied? What if they were already on their way? She would be the only defense between her friends and the First Order.

She was desperate, grasping at any thread of hope that would keep all of them together. “What about the bounty?”

“Maz’s pirates and their attacks on First Order freighters are holding the galaxy’s attention at the moment,” he said confidently, but his eyes betrayed his fear. “We’ll stick to the Outer Rim.”

“Well, you’ll need a pilot,” she said with an attempt to sound cheerful. “I’m going with you.” There was a terrible warning in the Force that screamed that if she allowed them to leave, they would never return. What if they were wrong? What is the First Order was waiting for an opportunity to track the Falcon? What if they led their army back to the Resistance? What if her vision came true?

“No, Chewie volunteered.” His response was quick and dismissive, but she could see it hurt him to treat her that way.

_Why are doing this, Finn? Because of Kylo Ren? Is the only way to fix our friendship to kill him? To break my own heart?_

“Okay, I can still help...” She reached for him, but he pushed past her instead.

“No,” he said, a finality to his tone. “It’s better if you’re not involved, especially with your... Force problem. I’m sorry, Rey.” She knew he was right, she had no control over their bond. Her connection could expose their secrets, or, worse, lead him straight to them. She knew she was a risk to them. But she wanted to save them all.
“But you could use my help!” she insisted. “I’ve got the Force; I could be helpful if—”

“No Force!”

The fear in his eyes set off Rey's intuition. “Why?”

He sighed. “This is one time when using the Force won’t protect us, Rey. You can’t go. End of story.”

“Who are these allies, Finn?”

“I...” His hesitation told her everything she needed to know. Whoever these allies were, she wasn't supposed to know. What was he keeping from her? “It's classified, Rey. But trust me, it could be dangerous for you.”

“Finn, if it's dangerous for me then it's dangerous to you. Don't go,” she warned, hoping her words would stop him in his determined path away from her. But he continued on with only a slight hesitation as he pivoted to smile at her heavy-heartedly.

“It would be dangerous for a Jedi, maybe even more dangerous than whatever it is you're continuing with our enemy.” Finn's head hung with the weight of the tension between them, and Rey held back tears of abandonment as he left her. There was something else in the Force, however. Something off.

Dangerous for a Jedi? Who could these allies be that would be dangerous to a Jedi?

There were endless civilizations and organizations that disliked the Jedi, but her mind kept wandering back to that strange conversation that Poe intentionally hid from her. The one that Kylo had translated from Huttese. The Resistance wouldn't form an alliance with criminals, would they?

It didn’t matter. Finn could be going to the safest world in the galaxy, but she couldn’t let him leave. Not on the Millennium Falcon, not with what she knew, not with the vision she had. As a last-ditch effort, she chose to tell him the truth.
“Finn don’t go,” she begged, tears were swelling in her eyes. “It’s not safe! I had a… dream, and you were dead under a blanket on the Falcon! The Force inside me is warning me that if you go, you won’t come back. I can’t lose you! Please!

Finn grabbed her shoulders and pivoted around her. “If you want to keep me safe, then kill the man who would put me under that blanket, Rey.” With a shake of his head, he turned and left her. There was nothing she could do to make him stay. Even if she told the Resistance the truth, it was too late. The voice inside warned her of leaving Barkesh. It begged her to wait, to have patience, to make them stay. If she told them the truth, they would leave—and run straight into the First Order. If she told them, she would be imprisoned, and there would be no one to stand between Kylo and the Resistance. If she wanted to save him, she had to do something she didn’t have the strength to do.

You do, the voice of the Force whispered. She stared at Finn's back as he faded from view into the darkness of the temple, lost in thoughts heavy with consequence. When he had disappeared from view, she followed her way out of the temple in a daze. Her legs felt heavy as she climbed the stone steps leading to the outside world. She settled on a step at the apex of the temple, opening the text to distract her from the war raging in her heart.

What if they have formed an alliance with the Hutts? We need any help we can get. But how can Finn accept this alliance in one breath and condemn my bond with Ben in the other? How is it any different? I trust Ben more than I trust a cartel of criminal traffickers, but Finn intends to force me into choosing between his friendship and Ben’s life. I can’t...

That is not the choice…the choice is between Finn’s life and Kylo Ren’s life. The voice from the Force whispered. Heed what the vision told you... your heart already knows... if Kylo Ren survives, Finn will die at his hand... if you do not choose, it could be both... or everyone you care about... Kylo does not want to live anymore... he knows he must pay for the deaths caused by his hand... do not condemn your family to death for him... you can stop the war by ending just one insignificant life of a monster no one will miss... you could be their hero, you can finally find belonging...

What if I condemn my friends to death by keeping Ben selfishly alive? He made his choice. I can’t sit by and allow the vision to come true. If it was Finn under the blanket, can I prevent it? How do I prevent something when I don’t even know what happened?

The bond moments were coming more often and strengthened in intensity each time they were connected. She knew she had to tell someone, and she knew exactly who needed to hear it. But her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps behind her. Her head snapped around to see Poe slowly approaching her on the steps.
“Can I join you?” he asked, blinking into the sunlight.

“Hey, Poe,” she said, attempting to conceal the awkwardness she felt to be alone with him, coupled with the fear of her consequential thoughts. She closed her eyes. It was all too much to shoulder. Pivoting back around, she chose not to answer his question. He sat down next to her on the steps anyway.

“We need to talk.” His tone was controlled but weary, and, for the first time since that night, she worried that she had hurt him. She hadn't given it much thought, her fear for Kylo's safety eclipsing the consideration for the man with whom she had shared an empty kiss. For the first time, she wondered if it had been empty for him as well.

She sighed, searching the bright turquoise sky for an escape. She may not have been able to avoid the conversation with the man sitting next to her – too close – but she could at least avoid looking in his charming eyes. She couldn't stand to see the pain in one more person's eyes – pain that she knew she had unwittingly caused. “Yeah, I know.”

“What was the other night about?” His anger was tempered but still audible in his voice. She imagined what would happen if she told him the truth: *I was trying to protect the Supreme Leader of the First Order, our enemy, who was truly the one I wanted to kiss.*

Yeah, that would go well, she decided, right up until they throw me into a cell. Though, the look on his face would almost be worth it.

“It was a mistake.” If he wanted to talk, she would tell him the truth, or as much as she could under the circumstances. “It meant nothing.”

“Yeah, I got that,” his words as sharp as a dagger's edge. “Why did you do it?”

The edge of uncertainty was exposed in her voice as much as her words. “I don’t know.”

It was true. She didn’t know why she kissed him. The Force guided her to do it, but she still didn't understand why. She could have distracted him any other way, maybe slapped his smug, drunken face for believing she would do that without getting to know him first. It would have saved them all the heartache. She wondered if he would have gone and told Leia about that too. Tempering her growing – possibly misplaced – anger, she reminded herself that he only wanted answers for what she had done to him.
“You have to do better than that. I know you never wanted to kiss me. So why? Was it a joke?” he asked through clenched teeth. The resentment was less fettered, his voice trembling with emotion. Her stomach lurch with guilt.

“No!” She turned to him, finally meeting his eyes. “I would never do that to anyone.” He jerked away when she moved to reach for his hand.

“Revenge?” he spat as if the word itself tasted of poison.

Shaking her head vehemently, she pleaded for him to see the truth in her eyes. “Of course not. I have nothing to get revenge for.”

*I wish I could tell you, I’m so sorry I did this... to you and Ben. I hurt you both, and all I wanted was to protect you.*

There was desperation behind his eyes; he longed for a logical reason for what had happened. She wondered if it would have been easier for him to swallow the lie that she had done it in jest or revenge rather than being left with whatever thought was churning through his head. “Did someone else ask you to do it?”

“What? No!”

“Then, why?” His voice cracked. His eyes, in that moment, reminded her of Kylo’s when she first saw him after Crait. There was deep, radiating anger within them that nearly eclipsed the underlying wound that oozed betrayal. But only nearly.

“It’s... complicated,” was all she could manage. She didn’t have an answer for him. She didn’t want to lie, but she couldn’t tell him the truth either.

“Complicated,” he muttered in indignation, clearly insulted that she could not be honest with him. There was no doubt, she had wounded him with her recklessness. She turned from him, reopening the text, avoiding him in a moment of remorse. She wanted to apologize, she truly did, but she was unsure how to do it without giving him the truth he desired... and deserved. This was why she deserved to be alone. She was terrible with people. Her fingers trailed across the page in distraction, reading the symbols with ease. She had nothing more she could say to him, and if she tried, she knew she would only further cause him pain. She hoped he would take the hint and leave.
her to her thoughts.

Fate, however, would not be so kind.


“Yes,” she replied without glancing up at him, grateful at least for the change in subject. But she should have known. Poe was more similar to Kylo than she was willing to admit. His mind was always analyzing, deducing, and reasoning. Learning. He was constantly thinking three steps ahead, and even if he asked a seemingly innocent question, there was always a motive behind it.

His words more suggestive this time, his tone heavy with implication. “The texts you couldn’t read?”

“Yes...” She slowly raised her eyes to see the understanding in his. He had successfully ensnared her in his trap, and they both knew it.

His voice was immediately accusatory, and rage swiftly replaced the remorse churning in her stomach. “What are you hiding?”

“Nothing!” she snapped back, knowing it was less of an answer and more of a diversion until she could formulate a better lie.

“How can you suddenly read texts that were foreign to you days ago. Who taught you?” he demanded, making it clear that this was a subject he wouldn't drop easily. He had caught her. Her only option was to lie or risk imprisonment. If she was in a detainment cell, she couldn’t help the Resistance.

“Threepio helped. I learned. I’m not hiding anything.” She may have felt confident in her dispassionate response, but Poe was less impressed with her performance.

“Is that the best you've got? Because it’s not just the books, Rey. You’ve been secretive lately, and I know Finn suspects something, too.” His eyes narrowed as she gulped in fear for her friend. “Or maybe he already knows? I told him I heard a man’s voice in your room the other night, the night you called me ‘Ben,’ and not once did Finn come to your defense or try to rationalize away my suspicions. Have you got him lying for you, or does he also realize you're not the girl we thought
you were?” Rey tried desperately to suppress the panic that flashed across her expression, but she knew he noticed it. He studied her meticulously, as if he were a Force-user, but he might as well have been one. Recognition settled over his features. “So, Rey, who was it in your room?”

She tried to withdraw back into herself, moderate her emotions. “Why do you care?”

_He is not Ben, he has no Force abilities, he can’t read my mind_, she reminded herself.

“So you admit it.” The fear rose in her throat as she realized what she had said, or at least, hadn’t denied. He may not have been Force-sensitive, but he was perceptive.

“Who I have in my room at night is none of your business, Colonel,” she replied calmly and defiantly. Perhaps she could twist it in her favor, make him believe it was another Resistance member in her room.

He looked down, his face growing red in anger. When his eyes rose back to hers, they were black, almost evil. Rey startled. “It will be ‘General’ soon enough,” he said. It sounded suspiciously like a threat. “And it will be my business if that voice belonged to who I think it did.”

She was careful to control the fear that gripped her senses. “And who do you think it was?” They both knew the answer; she had said his name, after all. The only question was what he would do. And what she could do to stop it.

Their argument was interrupted by a vibration that should not have been echoing through the valley. There were many sounds of the rainforest that were new to Rey – the sound of the wind shivering through trees, a creature’s call that sounded distinctly like air raid sirens, the sound of disembodied whispers whenever she strolled by the river nearby – but she knew the hum they heard was none of those new sounds. In fact, she was quite familiar with this sound – an engine. The blanched panic on Poe’s face was all the confirmation she needed. Practically in unison, their faces tilted upward toward the sky as a ship flew low overhead. Poe stiffened.

Rey barely heard Poe’s shouts over the thrashing of her heartbeat. “It’s a First Order recon ship!” He jumped to his feet, dragging her along with him.

_He lied._
They’re here.
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Poe sprinted down the steps inside the temple, and Rey stumbled in panic behind him.

What were they supposed to do? Should they hide? Should they spread out into the forest and wait for the troopers he would send to find them? Should they fight and rest their survival in the hope of overpowering their numbers? Or should they try to run? If they made it off-world, was there a destroyer waiting for them?

Poe skidded into the corridor and thrust his fist into the portable emergency siren that they had re-purposed from the old base. In an instant, he had switched from a wounded man desperate for answers to the fearless colonel. “First Order!” he shouted into his Master Comms. “They’re here!”

In a matter of seconds, the corridor was crammed with swarming bodies and decisive shouts. The effect on the Force was overwhelming – too many stimuli at once to focus on. Rey stood in the center, trying to gain her bearings. Finn crashed into her as he ran down the corridor, his mission abandoned. “What do we do?” he yelled to Poe. “Do we evacuate?”

“No! Get your weapons! We fight!” was the disembodied answer from somewhere deeper in the temple.

Finn turned to Rey with fire in his eyes, grasping her shoulders roughly. She had never seen her friend with such distrust in his eyes. “Did you know about this?” he shouted in anger. “Did you do this to make me stay?”

Rey shook her head angrily, tears welling in her eyes.

“What did you do, Rey? You led him here!”

“No, I didn’t!” she insisted.

“He’ll kill us all,” he rasped, overcome with emotion, “because of you.” He shook his own head in disbelief, pushing her away from him and disappearing into the crowd swarming the corridor. Rey stood in shock in the center of the chaos as members of the Resistance prepared for battle.
Your friends warned you, the voice in her head whispered. You had the chance to keep them safe... But instead, you led him right to you... Your friend is right; he will kill you all.

Did I do this? Did I do or say something that brought him here? How do I stop this? What do we do?

Ben, what will you do?

People shouted, boots squeaked down the corridor, the preparation for battle echoed off the walls of the temple. But the sound faded as the Force crackled in familiarity around her. She had done it, she had brought the monsters to their doorstep. Backing into the nearest room, she collapsed against the nearest wall in the darkness. Her breath was ragged as the severity of their situation pierced like ice through the shock.

“You’re afraid,” a deep voice said quietly from the shadows. “Why?”

Because you’re sitting in a ship outside, waiting to kill us all, and it’s all my fault. Or are you too much of a coward to face me again?

“Ben, I need you to be honest with me.” Her voice trembled in fear. “What are you here for?”

“Just you,” he answered.

He has come for you... The bond led him straight to you.

Her voice broke. “Why did you come here?”

His brows furrowed at her question and he studied her carefully, his eyes pinning her in place. She wasn’t certain how she expected him to react, but nonplussed did not top her list. “You brought me here.” He stepped closer, searching her fearful expression. She folded under his piercing stare, stealing a glance at the chaos of the corridor. His eyes followed her line of sight perceptively. “What is happening?” His voice was hushed but urgent. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me.”
He’s lying... he doesn’t want to help you... he’s here to kill your friends and take you as his prisoner, he wants to know what he’s walking into, the whispers told her.

“‘What is happening?’ You’re here to finish what you started on Crait!” she cried. She shut her eyes, pretending that this man whom she shared a bond with was not attempting to murder her only family. The darkness eased away her fear, silencing the siren and shouts from the hallway, slowing her thundering heart.

“Is this still about Barkhesh?” He straightened, the anger rolling off him in waves, but he remained silent until she opened her eyes to return his glare. “That’s not how the bond works. I have no control over the Force across the galaxy! And even if it did, even if I wanted to hurt you or your friends, I would not use the bond when I have an entire military at my disposal!”

“And you’re using that military to kill us all!”

“This,” he said, stepping closer as he pointed at her in irritation. “This is why I didn’t tell you I knew where you were.”

“I’m not stupid! I saw a First Order ship that just flew over our heads with my own eyes. Do you expect me to believe you know nothing of that, Supreme Leader?” She shoved against his solid mass, forcing him to take a half-step backward. As the astonishment faded, grim realization then fear flickered across his tense expression.

He ignored her physical challenge, his jaw tightened as he visibly tempered his anger. “Did they see you?” She was surprised by his sincerity. Lowering his head to meet her gaze, he moved to step closer, but stopped himself from reaching out to her. “Did they see any of your friends?”

How can he lie as if it’s nothing?

“I don’t know.” Her voice softened into a whisper, brows creased as she attempted to discern what game he was playing. “They could have seen us. Poe and I were outside on the steps when it flew over.”

“I’m sure you were,” he said petulantly, turning from her to stare out toward the corridor she hoped he couldn’t see, casting his face in shadow.
“Stop it! You, of all people, have no right to be angry with me!” her tone shuddered with disgust.
“Everyone hates me. Finn won’t talk to me. Poe was hurt by...what I did to him. He wanted me to explain why I did it. I lied to him. To protect you!” He worked his jaw but otherwise remained silent. “But I suppose I am the one that needs protection, not you.”

For once, his eyes were downcast instead of meeting hers. He seemed almost... chastened. “Don’t do anything. I can fix this.”

“You can fix it by leaving us alone!”

_Please don’t do this again. Don’t be the monster on Starkiller. And Concordia. And Crait._

He stared off behind her, lost to his thoughts. He refused to meet her furious stare, so she shifted into his line of sight, forcing his eyes to flicker to hers. “I can’t make them leave. It’s not that simple, but I’ll figure it out.”

_He can make them leave... he is the Supreme Leader... they are his army... but you know the truth... he doesn’t want them to leave... _the voice reasoned.

“No, it is that simple, Ben; you’re the Supreme Leader! Let us go! You don’t have to do this!” she echoed.

“I am not doing this,” he said through clenched teeth. “I wouldn’t do this! My general sent reconnaissance ships to habitable planets throughout the galaxy. If they haven’t seen you, then they don’t know you’re there. Don’t engage them. I told you I’ll figure this out.”

“We have weapons. How many are on the ship? We can fight them!” He had turned to walk away, but her words spun him on his heels. As he moved toward her, his fists clenched at his sides, it was the intensity in his eyes caused her to stumble back.

“No, Rey! There is only a squad of ten onboard, but that’s not the concern. They have to maintain periodic communication at fixed intervals with their commander!” Her back hit the wall behind her, but he continued to step closer. “If they miss one report, then more will come looking for them. They will find you!” His hands slammed against the wall on either side of her head in vehemence. His arms were locked, his hands splayed beside her, caging her in as he lowered himself to eye level. His chest was heaving in... Fear? Guilt? Deceit? She could not sense the cause; his emotions were tightly guarded behind the rage.
Her own side of the bond was slowly surrendering to darkness. The starving beast inside her could only be satiated with anger, and she was more than willing to surrender to its will. She knew he sensed the darkness through the bond and wondered if he resented how easily she could control it. He chewed his thoughts instead, letting them be swept away in his torrent of emotions. She stared at him fearlessly, challenging him as he loomed before her.

*Do not let him fool you... he has already kept secrets from you... he will lie to take what he wants from you... show him that true Jedi spirit of yours... show him you won't stand by and watch your friends die,* the whisper warned.

“How do I know this isn’t a trick, Ben?” She crossed her arms over her chest defiantly. His eyes darkened, a storm raging behind them. He studied her, hunching down to her eye level, but made no move to back away.

“A trick?” he scoffed. “If you believe that, you don’t know me at all, Rey.”

“I believe you have given me no reason to trust you.” His jaw hardened and his hands clenched into fists next to her head. She glared at him fearlessly, even as she watched the resentment spark into a blazing fury in his eyes. She would show him no fear; he didn't deserve to have that, too. She felt a snap in the Force and she prepared for him to thrust his fist through the wall by her head; but he shoved himself off the wall instead, backing away from her. His face was twisted in disgust.

*Clearly, you don’t,* his voice slipped through the barriers of the bond. She swiftly realized he had sensed her anticipation and was appalled she thought he would threaten her with harm, which was laughable, considering their current situation.

His eyes were narrowed, his fists clenched, his head shaking in disbelief. “I’ve only ever told you the truth. Isn’t that reason enough?”

“You also told me you could take whatever you want, so was that a lie? Or is this?” She felt a slight vindication at returning the derision that he had excelled at using to manipulate conversations to his will in their early connections.

“Neither,” his voice wavered. His tense expression was anything but the calm and controlled mask he was struggling to compose. “I believed it was true at the time, but I underestimated you. If we are going to relive when we first met, when you were only my enemy, it’s only fair to remember everything. I also told you I wanted to be honest with you from the beginning. And I have been.”
He told you that you would never be alone... but then he didn’t choose you... he lied... he chose to be your enemy... the voice in the Force reminded her.

“I’m sorry if my enemy assuring me of his honesty doesn’t inspire much faith,” Rey spat. It wasn’t until his sharp inhale shattered the blind fury surrounding her, when her eyes finally connected with his, that she saw the truth and torment piercing through his crumbling default anger. As the darkness faded, she felt as if she were fully in control over her own mind again. Remorse tightened in her throat. He stared at her in wounded reticence, hands hanging loosely in defeat at his sides, his presence withdrawing from her in the bond. She feared he would leave.

“We have this rare bond, yet you refuse to use it to your advantage when it is actually important.” His voice was strained, his expression unreadable. “Since I am only of use to you when you need something from me, using our bond should be of no consequence to you. Go ahead, search my mind for the truth, I’ll wait.”

Rey could feel through the bond how deeply she was wounding him. If she were honest with herself, she knew she didn’t want to lose him. When she thought about Kylo and the bond, he had become something permanent to her. Sure, their connection was wrought with frustration on both sides, but he was always there nonetheless, even if it was not in the capacity she had hoped for.

Bond aside, Rey had never had a connection with anyone like she had with him. He had been there for her in ways no one else had and hurt her in ways no one else ever could. She was not particularly adept at social interactions, living the majority of her life alone, and Kylo was a lost, broken, difficult man. It didn’t help that emotions were intensified and complicated because they were enemies on the opposite sides of the war. The conflict that had arisen from fleeting moments of vulnerable truth was too consequential for either of them to deny the significance of their connection. She could not tolerate him most days – well, she could not tolerate what he stood for, the absurd thoughts that he allowed to become words, or the nonsensical decisions he made – but there was something there that she could not, nor particularly desired, to explain. Maybe that was why something deep inside was screaming at her, pleading with her to listen, because there was no denying the look in his eyes. She was pushing him away; she could lose him.

“Ben, I can’t let them die. In my vision, I think the Force was trying to show me that Finn will die. I can’t lose him. I need your help,” she whispered. “Please.”

“I won’t let them die,” he said tensely, staring at the ceiling, willing the words from his lips. “I promise you, I will handle this. Just... trust me.” For just a moment, in the center of chaos, she felt that everything would be all okay. Something deep inside her continued to plead with her to let the Force guide her.
An explosion drew her attention away from him. Fear bloomed, renewed, and with it, darkness. The cold, dark tendrils soothed her, silencing an intuitive warning that she should fight it; but she did not fear the darkness, she believed she was strong enough to control it this time. She had controlled hunger, loneliness, pain, and longing her entire life. How was darkness any different? Luke feared it because he did not understand it. Kylo feared it because he had followed it blindly to the dark side. Darkness had never wronged her, had never led her astray, had never caused her to make the immoral choice. Why should she fear it?

*Your friends are in trouble… his fleet is killing them… while he keeps you distracted from it all… do you truly trust him with their lives after everything he has done…* the voice whispered, overriding her internal pleas.

“Why would you help me? Why should I trust you?” she asked, following the guidance of the whisper.

“I don’t believe it wise to ask me to consider that, Rey, as I am the *only* one standing between you and the army of the First Order.” His voice hardened with contempt and he tore his wounded stare away from her. “I am talking about actively committing treason; don’t ask me to contemplate the utter insanity of betraying everyone I lead. More importantly, if you deem me untrustworthy, why are you asking me for help?”

“Because I don’t have a choice!”

“You do have a choice; either you trust me, or you all die,” he said, his expression dark and closed off to her scrutiny. “If the Order discovers what I am about to do, for people who would kill me in a heartbeat, I will be executed. I’ve made my choice, now make yours.”

*If you trust him… he will kill them all… and keep you for himself… he will not make the mistake of allowing you to escape this time…* the voice whispered.

Rey was confused. Everything of the light in her begged for her to trust him. Could she trust the darkness? Luke had proven that the light was not always right, but shouldn’t it be the darkness guiding her to trust Kylo, not the light? Why did the voice side with the darkness? She wanted to trust him, but the voice was wise.

“You know about Barkhesh! Your general was talking about battle preparations! How do I trust you when I know that truth?”
“I don’t know what else to say,” he replied, his voice weary and embittered. “Either trust in me and the bond or listen to the darkness I sense in you. You have no idea what you’re playing with. I can’t explain its intensity in you, I’ve never felt anything like it. And I can’t help you if you don’t let me in. I know you think you can control it. I know it feels right. And I know there is nothing I can say to prove that the truth the darkness promises you is a lie. But remember, everything you hate in me is because I believed that lie, too. So make your choice.” His words were earnest, and he seemed momentarily startled by his admission. Had her own mind not been clouded by darkness, she would have been pressed to consider the significance of that admission.

*He’s trying to distract you… this is not about you… him… the light… or the darkness… he is here to eliminate the Resistance…*

“But you would kill my friends!”

“I promised you - not today.” He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands as he put distance between them. She could feel the escalation of agitated energy in the Force. Kylo was growing impatient and irritated, losing the limited control he possessed, but she needed the truth.

Her lips curled as she bared her teeth. “So you admit you would.”

“Only if necessary,” he said as he leaned his weight onto a chair by his desk, gripping it tightly to center himself. “I’d prefer to imprison them. But it’s war. They wouldn’t protect me as I am prepared to do for them. They would kill me the second they had the information they needed from me, though I realize now that matters little to you. It should concern you more for practical reasons, considering what little information we have of the bond we share. My death could kill you. But, yes, worry about the anarchists who would cast you out if they knew our secret.”

“You would imprison your own mother?” She glared at him in disgust, and he lowered his eyes in ... guilt?

“She would do worse to me,” he murmured, still refusing to make eye contact.

*If he would imprison his mother…and kill his father…what would he do to the others… His obsession with your power will be the death of everyone you ever loved… You have led him straight to your friends… if you do not stop him… your vision will be realized… your friend’s broken body will be under that blanket… because Kylo Ren will have put him there… the voice continued.*
No... I won’t be the reason for the death of the only family I have ever known.

“What if...” Her voice trembled in desperation. “What if I promise I’ll go with you as your prisoner? Right now. I promise I will not fight back or try to escape, if you promise to leave this planet with my friends free and unharmed.” It was everything he’d asked of her in the throne room, but this time, she wouldn’t flee. They would both get what they wanted.

His arms tensed as his hands curled tighter around the back of a chair in front of him. He hunched over until his desperate, needy eyes were level with hers. He stared at her for far too long, searching her stare as he considered her offer. “You would be a slave, as you had been on Jakku?”

This is what he always wanted, why does he sound so offended?

“Please, spare them,” she whispered. “And you can… take whatever you want.”

His only response was a slight tick of his jaw before his eyes slid closed. The only sound in the room was his heavy breath. He was apoplectic; his fingers clenched onto the back of the chair, and it groaned underneath his vice-like grip. Her only understanding of his thoughts was the white-hot rage burning in the Force around them. And underneath... disgust. No, that wasn’t a strong enough word for what she felt in him. Unrestrained revulsion.

I don’t understand...

Without warning, he turned and threw the chair across his room. Then he swept his arm violently over his desk, sending the objects crashing to the floor. With the surface clear, he lifted the desk itself and threw it against the wall. There must have been a holobook shelf or cabinet that he threw it into, because it sounded like the room exploded. Undoubtedly, it left a staggering amount of damage in his wake. None of the destruction was achieved with the Force, as if he wanted to feel the weight of it all in his hands. The entire Force around her was screaming. Rey couldn’t determine whether his enraged screaming was in the room or over the connection or both. She didn’t move as he continued his rampage. He was indiscriminate in his violence, destroying everything in his path, though the objects were clearly directed away from her. When he moved toward the bed, she’d had enough.

“Ben!”
When Kylo turned, he looked positively feral. The bond burned with the tension between them, his eyes blazing in intensity. As his chest heaved with darkness – with frantic rage – she steadily held his glare. His fingers twitched with a desire for destruction, but she watched as the vicious hunger of darkness tempered slowly as the adrenaline faded. He was left trembling in the center of the room, eyes locked with hers. “Are you quite done?”

When he had finally regained control to speak again, his voice was harsh but restrained. “This isn’t me. I have no reason to lie, and, even if I did, the bond does not. I promise you, if I was there, you would know it, you would feel it.”

“And I… I can’t…” His lip curled, his hands clenched, and she thought he would lose control again. But after a moment, he continued, his voice low. “How could you offer yourself to me like some… some bargaining credit. I’m not a Hutt. I don’t want you as my prisoner, or my… slave. How could you think I want – ”

“You’re the one who kidnapped me!” she shouted in an odd mix of righteousness and shame. He stared at her for a moment, searching her eyes for something. He must have not found what he was looking for, because he clenched his jaw in anger and turned away from her.

“If you don’t believe another single word I say, believe this: If I wanted to find you, I would find you myself. I wouldn’t send Hux’s men to do it. I wouldn’t even trust the Knights with your safety. And where am I right now, hmm?” Defeated, he manipulated the Force to return the desk to its original location. Then he lifted an overturned chair off the floor and dragged it to his desk. He called a datapad from the floor – now cracked – and tossed it onto his desk. With a sigh, he slumped down into the chair, holding his head in his hands, surrounded by his own destruction.

Rey could feel the tension in him again, his emotions at the tipping point. Waiting for him to say something, anything, she stood in the quiet room as bombs exploded in the distance. The temple was abandoned save for them, but she couldn’t leave until she knew her friends were safe. Kylo was in no hurry to speak with her again, however. The silence between them stretched into minutes. Then, just as she stepped forward to talk some sense into him, he snapped. Kylo slammed his fist on the desk, deepening a crack that was etched across its surface. He closed his eyes as his breathing slowed. “This just might kill me, but I can’t…” He shook his head, refusing to look at her. “I can’t do this anymore with you.” He twisted his body away from her and focused on the datapad in front of him.

The heartbreak in his words had shattered through the darkness.

The screams of her inner voice returned, begging her to open herself to the bond. She was surprised to find his side of the bond open completely, a rarity between them. His despair and resentment were overwhelming, but at the center of the torment was the truth. It had been there all along, but
only now did she see it clearly.

An even more terrifying truth was that she hadn’t needed the bond. Rationally, she should have known, but she realized the darkness had clouded her thinking.

He’s been honest, about all of this. Of course, he’s not here, he’s at a desk in his chambers, she realized. Even when he was destroying his room, how did I not realize… He’s right, I can’t control the darkness. If I know one thing about him, he’d be here with his troops if he knew about this. He’d be leading them despite his general’s protests. This is not some trick, he is not here to kill us, this wasn’t Ben at all.

“Fine, I believe you, okay?” she said, her voice soft with shame, but he refused to even look at her.

I need help. I’m afraid! You’re right. The darkness clouds my thoughts.

Kylo had been right – about all of it. He had assured her that he would protect her friends, but in her darkness, she hadn’t believed him. In her darkness, she had made many mistakes with him. There had been too many words she had regretted after the darkness faded. This wasn’t who she was, she knew that, so why did she continue to listen to it? She had never feared it before, but she did now. While the whispers in the Force spoke the truth, she didn’t have to be cruel. Even after all he had done, she wasn’t entirely certain he deserved it.

And now… because of her darkness, she hadn’t seen his offer of help for what it had been. Now she had wasted the time to warn her friends, now they were in danger. Now Kylo wouldn’t even look at her. She knew she owed him a conversation – an explanation of what was happening to her – more than anything, she owed him an apology for her cruel words.

“What do we do?” she said instead. “My friends didn’t stay here and do nothing. I can hear explosions. How do I stop this? Please, you have to help me.” He was no longer paying attention to her, instead, he focused intently on typing something on the screen at his desk. She could see it over his shoulder. It was nothing important. He was scrolling through an officer directory.

Is being a Supreme Leader more important than our lives?

“Ben!”
When he finally dragged his eyes up to meet her stare, she whispered. “Please.”

“Ah, so now that you believe me, you expect my help?” he sneered, the look in his eyes positively malicious. “No. I told you, I can’t take this anymore. I have sat by and let you fight me and play your mind games with me. You attempt to kill me every chance you get. I see now, I truly am only an enemy to you. That is all I will ever be. My only worth is what I can do for the Resistance. I am nothing to you unless your friends need help. Then once you’ve used me, you throw me away again like garbage. I guess you’ve learned from the best.” The tone itself was not cutting, but the words gutted her nonetheless. She knew she would never forget exactly how each devastated word sounded as he bared his soul to her.

“I will help you all now, because I promised I would. And promises actually mean something to me. But if you want to treat me like your enemy, Rey, I’ll be your enemy. It’s what I’m good at. You have no idea the lengths I have gone to keep you safe, but if you want to doubt me, I’ll show you what being my enemy is like, and you can find some other fool to use. If I were you, I’d leave Barkhesh, because your enemy knows where you are, and I won’t commit treason for you again. I don’t need you, this forsaken bond, any of it. I have spent my entire life alone, and even loneliness is better than this. I want you to leave, and I never want to see you again.” His voice broke with his words, as he tore his stormy gaze away from her.

Rey could barely hear her own voice over her shuddering breath. “Ben, what are you saying?” His eyes remained fixed on the datapad as she realized just what she had done in her darkness. She was left with nothing to do but plead. “Don’t do this!”

There was as much desperation to her plea as there was finality to his whisper. “It’s done, Rey.”

You don't mean this. You can't.

For all his harsh words and cruel choices, she never imagined he would be the one to end it. I'm sorry, she wanted to say, but it was meaningless. She wasn't sorry for not trusting him, only sorry she had hurt him. She knew that wasn't enough.

“What do we do now?” she gasped through a hiccuped sob.

“There is no ‘we.’ What you do now is stop your friends from doing something foolish. You’re a Jedi; you don’t need my help. I’ve watched you use persuasion on your friends. You’re strong, I’m certain you will have no trouble doing it again. Now leave.”
“I don’t know how,” she said, voice quivering.

“Walk away,” he answered. “That is all you ever had to do. Just walk away, you're good at it.”
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

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Rey backed away from him in disbelief, trying to wrap her mind around his cruel words. The bond snapped shut as she entered the corridor, just as he said it would. There were sirens and explosions, and the Force was chaotic with energy as she navigated the empty corridor. She had to find her friends, she had to do something. She found Rose sprinting up the temple steps with a blaster.

Rey pulled the blaster from her own belt, following her friend up the steps. “Where are Finn and Poe?”

“Rey, where were you?” Rose huffed between breaths. “They think the ship landed by the old base, and there shouldn’t be more than a dozen onboard.”

“There are only ten,” Rey said quickly, squinting as the bright rays of the sun blinded her temporarily. They didn’t hesitate to sprint across the small landing and down the steps to the jungle. Rey felt each step down in the Force as she blinked away the dark spots in her vision.

“Even better,” Rose panted next to her, eyes forward with determination. “They left with the others, hoping to eliminate them all before they can relay our position.”

Rey nearly tripped down the last step as her friend’s word sunk in. “No, Rose, they can’t! If those stormtroopers disappear, a lot more will come looking!”

Rose stopped at the base of the stairs. “How do you…”

“Just trust me!” Rey shouted, pulled her friend by the arm. “We have to stop them! If we don’t, we all die!” The two women took off into the jungle after Finn and Poe. Rey buried her fear over Kylo’s angry words, her fear for the future, her fear for her friends, and focused on what she knew she needed to do. She had to trust Kylo. She had to stop the fighting, persuade both the First Order and the Resistance to lay down their weapons. It was the only way they could avoid a massacre. It was all up to her.

Branches reached like claws from the shadows, ripping and tearing at their exposed skin. Rey stumbled as something wrapped around her ankle. The momentum threw her toward the ground,
slicing her cheek. She screamed in fury, kicking and pulling at the tightening black vine that was
dragging her toward a hole in the forest floor. Channeling the darkness around her, she found the
strength to rip it from her ankle and immediately took off toward the base. Wiping the blood from
her cheek, it was only then that she realized she was crying, the salt from her tears stinging her
fresh wound.

Rey burst from the trees into the clearing, crashing into a wall of dread. The crumbled base loomed
before them; the First Order ship had set down to the left. Panic squeezed the breath from her lungs
as the sounds of blaster fire echoed across the clearing.

“We’re too late,” Rose gasped beside her, mirroring Rey’s thoughts.

What could she do? Even if she used a mind trick to persuade the Resistance to stop fighting, the
First Order wouldn’t, unless...

“We have to try!” Rey shouted, sprinting across the grass.

If the Resistance had the element of surprise, the battle did not reflect it. The stormtroopers had
corned them inside the rubble of the entrance to the base. Rey climbed over broken segments of the
roof, finding a crevice large enough to squeeze herself through. Rose followed behind her, calling
out to Finn as she ran. Red and blue blaster bolts illuminated the darkness around them as the
troopers continued their advance. Members of the Resistance found cover behind fallen debris and
sections from the collapsed ceiling. Rey found Poe in the darkness, nearly crashing into him in her
haste.

“You have to surrender!”

“What?” His arms were raised as he fired suppressive bolts at the entrance of the base. His eyes
flicked to hers quickly to judge her sincerity. “No way! We win or we die.”

“There’s another way!” she pleaded with him. Poe, however, refused to listen to her. She sighed,
accessing the bond to use it just once more. With a flick of her wrist, she pushed Poe’s firing arm to
his side, as Kylo had once done to her in the woods of Takodana. Poe’s eyes burned into hers. She
definitely had his attention now. “Just trust me. We can all walk away from this, but they have to
believe we are surrendering.”

Poe couldn’t move, but he didn’t look as terrified as he should have been, as she was. “How do I
know this isn’t a trick, Rey?”

Blasterfire flew past them, but Rey barely noticed. She was trying to help him, but he believed she was deceiving him. It hurt, not to be trusted. “What? Why would I deceive you?”

“I have my suspicions.”

Rey released him from her hold, hoping she could more easily reason with him. “Look, Poe, they have to check in with their commanders at pre-set intervals. If they disappear, more will come looking.”

“Who told you that?” Poe’s eyes flashed wildly as his perceptive mind deduced a dangerous conclusion. “Because I know it wasn’t Finn; he told me we had to engage them, or they'd immediately contact the rest of the First Order. And no one else here has first-hand knowledge of the First Order. How could you possibly come across that information?”

“You will not remember any of this,” she suggested, waving her hand. “And you will surrender to the First Order.”

Poe turned the blaster on her. “Did you just try a Jedi mind trick on me to secure victory for the First Order?”

“No...I...Why didn’t it work on you?”

A chill pricked across her skin at the sight of his conspiratorial smile. He winked. “Answer the question, traitor.”

“It was for the good of the Resistance!” She knew they were running out of time, but Poe looked more determined to ignore her pleas than when she had first arrived. Yes, she had made a mistake, but couldn’t he see that she had no choice? If he didn’t listen to her, they would all die. She had no reason to deceive them. “If you pretend to surrender, I can...”

“I’ll consider it after you tell me who gave you the information, Rey.”
“It doesn’t matter!” she cried defensively, trembling like a trapped animal. “What matters is that continuing this battle will be the death of us all!”

“Oh, it does matter, Rey, when the one supplying your information is Kylo Ren.” His accusation was ice in her veins. She panicked. The look in his eyes was murderous. Just as she had done every time she felt lost and alone, she turned to the only person she knew she shouldn’t.

Ben!

She sensed the buzzing of the Force around her, the familiar precedent to their connection. But as his form began to appear in the shadows – and she began to regret her decision to reach out to him – the bond snapped shut like a slammed door. Sound returned, and the Force was peaceful.

“You’re paranoid! How would I even talk to him! He’s across the galaxy!” she prevaricated in fear, realizing she was alone. Poe raised his blaster, leveling it between her eyes.

Ben, I need your help! Please!

She found his presence in her mind and pressed against it, willing the words into his energy in her mind.

Go away, his resonant voice groaned broodingly through their bond.

Poe is going to kill me! I told him we can’t kill the stormtroopers because they have to check in regularly. Now he has a blaster to my head, he’s demanding to know who gave me inside information on the First Order. He knows it’s you. I don’t know what to do!

He was quiet for a moment, and she thought he had abandoned her. Then she felt his profound fear.

Tell him the truth, Rey, tell him it was me. Tell him that I’m providing you information on the First Order. I’m the one committing treason, not you.

No, if they know about our bond, they will never trust me. It’s too much of a risk.
And if you don’t, they’ll kill you, Rey!

You don’t see the look in his eyes. He’ll kill me if I tell him it’s you!

“Tell me it isn’t that creature or, so help me, Rey, I will shoot you right now!” Poe demanded.

He knows it’s me. Tell him you’ve convinced me to turn myself over to him. You’ll be a hero for bringing me in. He won’t pass up the opportunity for my capture. It should give you enough time to escape. If I leave now, I can be there in –

And you’ll be killed. I won’t have you come here, not this way. Absolutely not.

Rey!

“Poe, please!” she stammered. “General Leia wouldn’t...”

Rey!

“This is treason, Rey! This is war! What did you think would happen?” Poe shouted. He aimed the blaster at her forehead and counted down. “Five...” Beads of sweat dripped down his forehead, but he held the blaster steady. The blaster barrel consumed her vision as she awaited her fate. “Four...” Not even when Kylo was at his most furious did she see the murderous rage that currently stared back at her. Undoubtedly, Poe would kill her where she stood. “Three...” She would die alone, abandoned by everyone. Maybe I deserve this, she thought, I have committed treason and kept Ben a secret from the Resistance. I betrayed everyone. “Two...” And I drove away the one person I have ever had a deep connection with. He warned me that it would end this way, but I didn’t listen. “One...” Rey closed her eyes and held her quivering breath.

I’m so sorry, Ben, for hurting you. I just want you to know that –

She heard the weapon fired, and she flinched, her eyes snapping open on instinct. He had aimed the blaster to the left of her head and fired. Her ears were ringing at the proximity of the bolt, terror and helplessness streaming into the bond. “Tell me now!” Poe screamed over the blasterfire behind
“My mother!” Kylo shouted in desperation. *Tell him it was my mother.*

“It was Leia!” she cried. The fire in Poe’s eyes faltered. He studied her for a moment, the blaster still aimed at her forehead.

“We’ll see,” he sneered. He turned toward his lieutenant, who had taken cover from the advancing attack behind a large pile of rubble. “Lieutenant Connix, raise the general on the comlink. Ask her if she gave Rey sensitive First Order information considering their recon ships.” Kaydel relayed the message into the comlink.

*Please mother, please save her.* Rey presumed Kylo hadn’t intended to project that thought.

“Yes, Lieutenant, I have been giving Rey all the information I have on the First Order. Heed her warnings,” Leia’s voice rasped over the comlink. A sob escaped from Rey’s throat as Poe slowly lowered the weapon.

Ben, why would she lie for me?

“See, that wasn’t so hard,” Poe smiled sardonically. “And you know I wouldn’t have actually shot you, right?”

Rey tried to speak through her shuddering breath. “Will you trust me now that we need to surrender?”

Ben?

“It’s too late. We already killed at least one, and I would bet my life they’ve already been in contact with the First Order.” He turned away from her to rejoin the fight.

“Poe, stop!” she screamed, grabbing his arm. But his head snapped to the entrance of the base. Rey followed his line of sight, her eyes falling on a turret aimed in their direction. A large flash illuminated the darkness.
Chapter End Notes

Threat of violence

Poe holds a gun to Rey's head to force her to admit treason
Kylo's plea

Chapter Notes

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Recon ships may have been unexpected, but how could they have not at least suspected the Order would commission recon droids in our search. Leia is smarter than that! There was no one monitoring ships in proximity on RADAR? No comms scans? No ordinances for daylight hours? No procedures at all? Did she not realize how far the grasp of Hux’s army... my army reaches? What was she thinking?

Blue was the perfect projection of an obedient droid, rolling silently behind him as he maneuvered past the other officers.

“Lieutenant Mitaka, a word?” Kylo said to the man who had avoided eye contact with him since he had made his presence known on the Command Bridge. Based upon the man’s paling expression, his tone had suggested the intended level of intimidation.

“Y...Yes, Supreme Leader?”

“Take a walk with me,” he said, leading him away from the bridge.

“Is there a problem, sir?” the lieutenant asked, his voice trembling nearly as much as his hands.

“The directory indicates you oversee the reconnaissance missions to the Seitia Sector in the Outer Rim. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Kylo’s eyes flashed seditiously. He waved two fingers discreetly as he manipulated the man’s mind. “You will destroy and forget any reconnaissance information regarding Barkhesh. You will not relay information regarding Barkhesh to anyone else. When the squad from the Barkhesh mission returns, you will have them report directly to me. Barkhesh is of no interest to the First Order. You will not remember this conversation.” The lieutenant mechanically repeated his words.
Ben?

Rey’s voice whispered in his head.

“That is all, Lieutenant.” He considered choking the man to maintain appearances, but he was distracted. As Mitaka slinked back to the bridge, the Force crackled around him. No, not now. He concentrated intently on their bond, blocking his energy from the magnetism to her. The connection forming between them snapped shut. Good. He stormed back toward his chambers. I told her I was done. I can’t do it anymore. Why won’t she just leave me in peace?

Ben, I need your help! Please!

He sensed her energy clawing desperately at his mind, her terror shivered down his spine.

Go away! he groaned.

He was frustrated with himself that he would make resolutions, then immediately break them for her.

Poe is going to kill me! I told him we can’t kill the stormtroopers because they have to check in regularly. Now he has a blaster to my head, he’s demanding to know who gave me inside information on the First Order. He suspects it’s you. I don’t know what to do!

Her words crashed into him like a quarterstaff to the diaphragm, forcing the breath from his lungs. She was panicking, he could sense her mortal fear. Rey was not one to panic easily, and he knew Poe Dameron well enough to know that if he raised a weapon against her, he intended to use it. If Poe was demanding the truth, there would be dire consequences if he didn’t receive it. Kylo ducked inside the nearest conference room, collapsing forward with both hands splayed on the table as he centered himself. There was no time to lose control. Rey needed him.

Kylo knew that it was inevitable that their bond would be discovered, when they were forced to answer for something that neither understood themselves. If fate were kinder – and it had been him who was discovered – Hux would have had him on his knees before an execution squad before third rotation. He had not considered what would happen to her if she were exposed first, though he never would have expected his mother to be as unforgiving as the First Order. That led him to the conclusion that the pilot was acting independently, which was far more dangerous.
She had committed treason, Poe would be within his rights to shoot her. There would be only one reason to stay his hand; if she were worth more alive to him than dead. Kylo instructed her as calmly as he could muster in his fear: *tell him the truth, Rey, tell him it was me. Tell him that I’m providing you information on the First Order. I’m the one committing treason, not you.*

_No, if they know about our bond, they will never trust me. It’s too much of a risk,* she answered stubbornly. He wondered what was so important about those people that she would risk her own life to maintain their trust. He was more than aware that it was too late for trust.

*And if you don’t, they’ll kill you, Rey!* he warned, pleading with her not to fight him for once.

_You don’t see the look in his eyes. He’ll kill me if I tell him it’s you!_

“Tell me it isn’t that creature or, so help me, Rey, I will shoot you right now!” He could hear Poe shouting at her over blaster fire. The true complications became clear. The Resistance had already engaged the reconnaissance squad. Any other day, he would chuckle at their irrationality, but not when it threatened the only person in the galaxy whose life was of consequence to him. He quickly contemplated a new strategy. They had run out of time. She had to offer Dameron something he wanted. Kylo suffered no delusions, he knew what Poe wanted more than anything else. If there was one decision he was not conflicted about, it was that he never intended for Rey to suffer for his choices.

_He knows it’s me. Tell him you’ve convinced me to turn myself over to him. You’ll be a hero for bringing me in. He won’t pass up the opportunity for my capture. It should give you enough time to escape.* He moved to the conference room computer terminal and began frantically mapping and calculating the distance to Barkhesh in his *Silencer.*

*If I leave now, I can be there in –* But Rey interrupted him to explain why she hated his plan to help her, a technique he had become increasingly familiar with over the last few weeks.

_And you’ll be killed. I won’t have you come here, not this way. Absolutely not,* she argued. He decided he would never understand her logic. She had attempted to take his life on numerous occasions, but the moment his death would mean something, she would not allow it. He feared she was too stubborn to accept his help, even though she had asked for it, and would pay for her irrationality with her life. He focused on tempering his frustration with her before he said something foolish and she shut him out. If he could just convince her to trust him…
“Poe, please!” he heard Rey beg her alleged friend. “General Leia wouldn’t...”

“Rey!”

“This is treason, Rey! This is war! What did you think would happen?” Poe sounded unhinged. Kylo recognized his tone as one belonging to a man prepared to escalate to the extreme.

Poe began a count down, “Five...”

Rey was officially on borrowed time, and he had only five seconds for one last desperate effort. Five seconds was a lifetime when he watched the light fade from his father’s eyes. But as he fought inevitability, it would pass as quickly as a stuttered breath. “Four...”

What could he do? If she refused his help, and if Dameron was intent on killing her, there was nothing Kylo could do from across the galaxy. There was no hope. She would die because she was bonded to him, and he and been too selfish to let her go.

“Three...”

No!

There had to be a way. He couldn’t stand by and allow Dameron to kill her. This was all his fault. His very existence threatened to end hers, as he always feared it would. “Two...”

Why hadn’t she taken his life on Starkiller? Why would the Force create the bond, knowing what he was? Why didn’t he just walk off that ledge? If he were dead, she would have been safe.

“One...”

I’m so sorry, Ben, for hurting you. I just want you to know that –
Kylo knew what those words meant. She had surrendered to her fate and was saying her goodbyes, but he refused to bear witness to her last words. Calling out to the Cosmic Force, he begged for the answer to save her. Just this once. The Force was silent.

The piercing sound of a proximate blaster shot caused him to stumble back against the wall. He sensed her jolt and all went silent. His reeling mind staggered to a halt. He tried to scream. He tried to call out to her. He tried to beg the Force to take him instead, but his throat forgot how to function, his lips trembled too fiercely to form words, and his lungs would not cooperate to suck in a breath. Time stood still. Stuck in limbo, he crumpled against the wall, paralyzed as he waited for a sign of life or for her energy to drift away into the Force.

The sound of a terrified breath across the bond drew oxygen into his own lungs. Something between a sigh and a sob escaped his lips. Tears stung his eyes. There was hope, she was alive.

“Tell me now!” He startled at the unhinged voice of Poe Dameron screaming across the bond. He refused to lose her. Please, he begged the Force. A kind face appeared in his mind and he shouted her name in desperation.

*My mother!* he gasped hoarsely. *Tell him it was my mother!*

“It was Leia!” she cried.

It had to work. It had to. He knew that he could survive her hating him. He could survive breaking the bond, spending the rest of his miserable life alone. But her death? In that moment, he understood the depth he had allowed their bond, her, to embed into his soul. He knew the bond was too strong for him to survive her death. While her fate was, hopefully, not tied to his, his fate was intrinsically tied to hers. He was relieved by that. Her death was an agony he did not want to live to bear. But that revelation was of little comfort then, because, more than anything, he wanted her to live.

The staccato of his pulse in his ears nearly drowned out the pilot’s next words. “We’ll see...Lieutenant Connix, raise the general on the comlink. Ask her if she gave Rey sensitive First Order information considering their recon ships.” The woman obediently followed his order. Kylo waited, back slumped against the wall, his entire body tense and shivering. His head tilted toward the ceiling, hot tears rolling down his cheeks. He silently begged his mother to not let him down again.
**Please mother, please save her.** He chanted it over and over in his head like a mantra, squeezing his eyes shut, listening in agony for the dreaded sound of a blaster shot that would extinguish the remaining flicker of light in his soul.

“Yes, Lieutenant, I have been giving Rey all the information I have on the First Order. Heed her warnings.” Kylo’s knees weakened under the weight of his emotions. Falling to pieces, he slid down the wall of the empty conference room. He barely recognized his mother’s voice; it was weak and broken, nothing like the commanding voice he once knew.

“See, that wasn’t so hard,” the pilot said. The reality was not lost on him that his mother had lied and risked her own life to save Rey. But that mattered little at that moment. What mattered was Rey’s fear had dissipated as she cried in relief. *She’s going to be okay. Everything would be okay.*

In his desperation to be alone in his own mind, he forced his energy from their connection, effectively shutting himself from the bond. She was safe, he had no doubt she could handle the squad of stormtroopers, and he could handle the cleanup. He released a long, shuddering exhale as the tension crumbled into the Force. His eyes startled open when he heard the crash on his side of the bond.

The conference room looked like an explosive device had been detonated. Every chair and object that was not secured to the floor had evidently been levitating only moments before. Presently, it all lay haphazardly around the room after it had been released from his unknowing hold. He hadn’t noticed any of it in his panic. His general could have waltzed in and shot him in the face, and he’d have been none the wiser. The bond would kill them both.

Kylo had tried to quietly – and not so quietly – to take her impulsive reactions. Nothing worked. There would always be a push/pull between them as long as they were on opposite sides of the war. She was systematically destroying him, and he would clearly allow her to do it. He continued to suffer for the small taste of peace he felt around her. Perhaps he would have endured it indefinitely, if it didn’t threaten to destroy her too.

Rey didn’t need him as a teacher or anything else, she needed him as her enemy. The events had bolstered two resolutions in his mind. The first resolution was that the bond had to be destroyed, for her sake and his own. Despite the peace, he couldn’t take her hatred anymore. It would be better for her to give up on him, and it would be better for him to let her go. Even if he wasn’t strong enough to end it for his own sake, he would do it for her. She needed him to let her go to survive. The other resolution was that he could never leave. If he was in control of the First Order, she was safe. He found purpose in his resolution.

The decision had done little to soothe the mercurial emotions raging inside him, however. His body still trembled with adrenaline, his mind achingly reliving the events of the past few minutes. He
urgently sought equilibrium in the fading storm. He could let go, release the emotions surging inside him, and sob uncontrollably until he collapsed in exhaustion on the cold, comfortless floor – or – he could destroy, release the emotions surging inside him through violence, until he collapsed in exhaustion on the cold, comfortless floor. Kylo stood weakly. The crackling of his lightsaber echoed off the walls of the empty conference room.

Chapter End Notes

Threat of violence
Poe's threat of violence from the last chapter from Kylo's POV
Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Get down!” Poe shouted, collapsing over Rey as he forced her to the ground, and the location they had been standing exploded in a blinding fireball. The concussive wave of the blast knocked Rey unconscious momentarily. When her eyes snapped open, her vision was blurred by the resulting cloud of dust. The battle around her was silent save for the loud ringing in her ears. She coughed as she pushed herself to a stand, immediately regretting the decision. Nausea and vertigo crashed through her senses. She dropped to her knees, crawling to a form kneeling a few meters in front of her.

As she dragged herself closer to the figure, her senses came crashing back all at once. The blaster fire was muffled by the screams of the injured and cries of the desperate. Smoke assaulted her lungs, and a metallic taste remained on her tongue. Her shoulder ached from the fall, but she was otherwise unscathed. Her hand bumped something solid. Rey looked down, disoriented, and realized it was a person. She waited for the rise and fall of their chest, but there was nothing. The woman’s face was covered in ash. Rey didn’t even know her name. The woman were sprawled lifeless at her feet, and there was nothing Rey could do.

Rey searched around her, but there was no one sprinting to render aid. The woman had fallen defending the Resistance, but no one stopped. No one cried. No one tried to save her. She was immediately accepted as a casualty of war as the others ran past her. This was the reality of war. Rey could just as easily have been the one dead on the floor. Would anyone care if it was her instead? Other than the man who had just offered to exchange his life for hers?

“I’m so sorry,” she cried. Her tears were lost to the debris on the ground. She knew there would be casualties in the war, she had seen good people die before, and she didn’t know the woman – but seeing someone dead made the impending war a reality it hadn’t been before. This woman had died for nothing.

Rey began crawling forward, searching for Poe to help her drag the woman’s body to safety, but she stilled as Poe’s form appeared through the cloud of dust. He was rocking on his knees, screaming in agony. *But not physical agony...* she realized. He was concentrating on pieces of singed wire, chips and drives in his hands. There were metal fragments in his lap.

Barely recognizable orange and white metal fragments.

Perhaps Rey could have convinced herself that her scavenger brain did not easily recognize the
charred remnants in his hands as droid parts, but that antennae that was scattered among the debris she would have recognized anywhere. Rey choked on a sob as she realized who else had been an unnecessary casualty of the explosion.

_Beebee-Ate._

Poe was unhinged. He reminded her of Kylo in that moment, tears of sorrow replaced by screams of fury. If she gave Poe a lightsaber, she had no doubt he would destroy the entire base. He would blame the stormtroopers, kill them all, but it was his choices that led to the droid’s destruction. She wiped at the tears falling down her cheeks as his sweet binary beeps replayed in her mind. Rage burned through her veins, quickly replaced by the cold nothingness of darkness.

“This is your fault!” she shouted hoarsely at Poe. “His death is on your hands! You should have just listened to me and surrendered!”

She pushed herself to a stand and waved her arms in defeat. “Cease fire!” she shouted. “We surrender!” Neither side heeded her words. Blaster bolts streamed across her vision from every direction.

She swallowed apprehensively and stepped out from behind a section of rubble, her arms waving above her head. If the Resistance saw her, she had to believe they would stop firing. Her only hope was that the stormtroopers noticed their surrender before they killed her.

“I surrender!” she shouted. She waited for her friends to suspend their attack, but it was the First Order that ended the assault first.

“That’s the girl! That’s the girl! Cease fire!” a trooper shouted.

_The girl?_

“I have come to negotiate our surrender,” Rey said, stepping toward the stormtroopers, her hands raised non-threateningly. The troopers kept their weapons trained upon her as she walked cautiously out to meet them. She counted seven alive; three more lay dead by the entrance to the base. If Kylo had told her the truth, then they were all accounted for. She waited until they had surrounded her before speaking again. Manipulating each of their minds as easily as she had Finn’s and Rose’s in the rainforest, she spoke with persuasion.
“You will leave on your ship immediately. You will not remember the battle that took place here. You will remember that you landed on this planet, there was no sign of the Resistance, the base was destroyed, and three of your men were killed when you were attacked by a pack of wild beasts. It is your opinion that no further reconnaissance missions are necessary for this planet.” The seven troopers repeated her speech in unison, then turned back toward the ship.

“Wait,” she said to the trooper closest to her. “You will answer me honestly.”

“I will answer you honestly,” he repeated mechanically.

“Who am I to you?” Her voice softened as she thought of the young man under that mask, not unlike Finn, who had become a pawn of war.

“The girl from the holo,” he replied simply.

“What does the holo say?”

“The bounty. ‘Capture Only.’ We are under direct orders by the Supreme Leader not to engage or harm the Jedi girl or the general under penalty of death. We are to detain them and await further orders from the Supreme Leader himself.” It would have been easier, she thought, if he wanted her dead. Shame churned in her gut.

“You will leave and not remember this conversation,” she whispered through tears.

“I will leave and not remember this conversation.”

Rey stepped back into what was left of the base. They were safe... again. Poe would see now what she could be for the Resistance. Even if he suspected her bond, it had helped save them. Maybe she was meant to be a Jedi. Maybe she could be what they all wanted her to be. Maybe there was still hope for her in the Resistance. She hadn’t prevented casualties, but she’d prevented a massacre. She smiled - even though she knew they had an uphill battle.

Rey would have to tell Leia the truth after the woman willingly assisted in her lie. She would have to forgive Poe for almost killing her and convince him she was not committing treason with their enemy. And she would have to apologize to Kylo and tell him the truth about the darkness that was clouding her thoughts. There was so much to fear, but, for the moment, everything would be okay.
She was not nothing with them. They needed her as much as she needed them. She smiled, because she finally had hope that she was exactly where she needed to be.

She smiled… until she saw the expression on their faces. No one else was smiling, celebrating or, at the very least, thanking her for fixing their mistake. No, the other Resistance members only stared at her in silent incredulity... and terror. Her eyes scanned through the dust and smoke until she found Finn. She waited for him to say something, to embrace her in relief, but he stood as motionless as the rest.

_Are they... afraid of me?_

“Finn...” she began, but he shook his head in disbelief. His eyes told her everything she needed to know. He didn’t trust her. None of them did.

“You’re all welcome!” she spat, pushing past them to search the rubble where Poe had knelt only moments before. _Please, she begged the Force, please let it be intact._ In answer, she caught the glint of something silver in the rubble. It could have been anything, but she knew. _The central processor._ She cradled the component to her chest, turning back toward the temple. This wasn’t for Poe, this was for Beebee-Ate. Rose may have called after her, but the anger spurred her forward. As she stomped through the trees, she dared the beasts that hid in the shadows to instigate a fight with her.
Chapter End Notes

Death

BB8 is blown-up
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Rey didn’t need to avoid her friends when they returned to the temple; they all kept their distance from her. As she walked past them in the corridors, she sensed their fear and heard their harsh whispers. She felt even more lonely than she had before. Kylo’s emotions were volatile on the other side of the bond in a way she had not felt since Crait, but her connection to him was soothing. He was there; he understood this alienation and solitude.

The more she thought about him, the less she feared he was the temptation to the dark side as Luke had feared. No, not when he was the one pushing her from the darkness. Underneath the mask others saw, she knew the truth – she had from the beginning, and it scared him. She had felt his powerful light, she knew the real Ben Solo that no one else was privy to. He was the only one who told her the truth, who understood her, who knew who she was under her mask.

He just happened to be the most incorrigible and frustrating person in the entire galaxy. Every time she thought he was finally accepting the light, he would become unpredictable as ever – or perhaps predictable from her perspective – and would disappoint her again.

He had, however, never pretended to be more than he was, never promised more than he had to give, never attempted to hide his faults. And he held her to the same expectations. He only wanted her to be her, even if that made her his enemy. Except, she wasn’t so certain she saw them as enemies anymore. Her only certainty was that their connection was complicated and confusing. She didn’t know when it happened; the bond’s one constant was that they were always pitted against each other, arguing their sides, yet somehow over those arguments, she had only thought of him when her life was in peril. Even when he was angry with her, he feared for her life, he saved her, willing to exchange his own in the process. That wasn’t the behavior of an enemy, either.

A golden protocol droid interrupted her thoughts. “Miss Rey, it is I, See-Threepio, human-cyborg relations. Princess Leia has presently requested your company.”

Rey knew it was time to talk to Leia. In hindsight, she knew she should have talked to her from the beginning. Rose and Kylo were right: Leia likely suspected she’d been hiding something all along. Leia knew she lied, but how much she knew, Rey wasn’t certain. Did she know about the Supremacy? Did she know about the bond? What would she do when she knew the truth? Rey had kept the connection she had with her son, their enemy, a secret from her. Rey had lied to the mother of her bondmate, but she had still lied for her. Leia had saved her life. Why?
Maybe it wasn’t for her, maybe it was for Kylo. Maybe she had the same hope Rey did - if Kylo was willing to commit treason to protect them, he was not the man he was on Starkiller or Crait, he could come home to them... to her. Rey had to bring Kylo home for his mother. If not in person, then through the bond. The past didn’t matter, Rey knew he would want to see his dying mother after he begged Leia so desperately to save her.

Threepio had given her the perfect opportunity to sit down with Leia, but Rey wasn’t ready. She needed to talk to Ben first, he needed to be there to help explain it to his mother. If she opened a connection with Leia in the room without forewarning, she doubted he would react favorably. Rey smiled politely at the protocol droid. “Please tell the general that I am exhausted and heading to my room to rest, but I will see her first thing in the morning.”

“I will, indeed, Miss Rey,” Threepio responded.

As he sauntered away, Rey let her curiosity get the best of her. “Threepio, do you remember Ben?”

The droid turned. “Are you speaking of Ben Kenobi?”

“No, Ben Solo,” she whispered, fearful of those who might have overheard.

“Ah, yes,” the protocol droid said, clearly not understanding her desire for a clandestine conversation. “Of course, Master Ben.”

“Can you tell me about him?”

“I am sorry, miss, my service was to the princess,” the droid answered, “but if my memory serves me correctly, he was quite proficient with languages – for a human – did you know that I am fluent in over six million forms of c–

“Yes, Threepio!”

“Right,” the golden droid said with a huff, “They spared no expense in his education. He was groomed at an early age for the Senate. I do believe he showed promise with piloting as well.”
“But what was he like,” Rey asked with barely concealed exasperation.

“Kind, to those of the cyborg variety. But mostly sad. I do apologize, I am not certain I have much more to tell, as I have been instructed not to mention the younger Master after… there I go, rambling again. The pr… general will have my core processor one of these days. Do have a pleasant slumber, Miss Rey.”

Rey blinked. “Slumber?”

“Your rest?

“Of course,” she said, trying her best to hide her disappointment. “Thank you, Threepio.” Rey wanted someone to tell her who Kylo had been, so she could understand who he was now. The real him; not the man her friends believed he was or the man she thought he had been. Rey walked to her room and closed her eyes. There was only one person in the galaxy who could tell her who he really was.

Ben.

Thinking his name was all it required. Her eyes flickered open as she felt the electrical charge of their bond.

Kylo stood with Blue in a massive library. Archives. His back was to her as he swiped through a holobook, which cast his face and dark hair in a blue hue. Something stirred low in her belly at the sight of him; something she couldn’t explain away as purely relief, fear, or hope.

“Ben?” she asked hesitantly. Hanging his head, he slowly pivoted to face her. He discarded the holobook – the topic holocrons – and his eyelids slid closed as exhaled a long breath. After a moment, he opened his eyes to gaze up at her. His eyes were red-rimmed and swollen, flickering with conflict.

“You’re alright?” he murmured, the relief spilling over into the bond.

She smiled. “Only because of you and Leia.”
He glanced away, nodding as he swallowed his emotions. “Good.”

Her heart beat wildly as he walked toward her, stopping close enough to hand her the other half of the broken lightsaber. It was the one she had thrown at him with the droid parts in their earliest connections after Crait. He had kept it – his family’s legacy symbolized in its broken crystal – and he had returned it to her. Her smile widened.

It was only as he walked past her that she realized something was wrong. The bond was hardened and closed-off. Her smile faded. She knew the last time they had seen each other that he was angry, but he had helped her, he had saved her. He wouldn’t have done that if he meant what he said, would he?

“Where are you going?”

“I thought it was obvious. Away from you.” His words tore through her as if he’d fired them out of a blaster. Everything about him felt wrong, as if his Force energy was flowing against the currents of destiny. He had spoken the words, but he couldn’t have meant them. Could he? She reached for him, to make him stay, but he jerked his arm away.

Ben, no. Not this.

“Why?” she gasped. “We need to talk about everything that just happened! What you did for me and offered to do for me...”

“...was nothing. It changed nothing. Understand?” In desperation, Rey moved in front of him, blocking an easy exit. She weighed nothing compared to him, but he did not push her out of his path as he easily could have. Clearly, he wanted to avoid confrontation. His words and actions seemed almost forced, as if it wasn’t truly what he wanted. His eyes remained fixed on the floor as she pleaded with him.

“Obviously, it changed something! You won’t even look it at me. Please, look at me. My friends stare at me like they don’t know me, but not you. From the moment we first met, you looked at me like you knew me better than I knew myself. Maybe... maybe you do. I’m afraid and I feel so alone. Don’t do this. Please.”

“What do you want from me this time?” he sighed, “Have you not used me enough? I thought I made myself clear.”
She wanted to embrace him, slap him, scream at him until he at least looked at her. If she could just see his eyes, she would know where they stood. “You saved my life, again. You disappeared before I could thank you. I think that deserves a conversation at least.”

“Fine, say it,” he said with a flippant wave of his hand. His energy felt like jagged ice, nothing like the flickering fire she had come to know.

“Thank you, for – ”

“Now you’ve thanked me,” he said impassively. “Leave or move.”

Her knees felt weak, her body shivering as she held back tears. It didn’t make any sense. What had happened since their bond had last closed? He had helped her when he didn’t have to, and now he suddenly hated her again?

“You committed treason to keep me safe; you were going to turn yourself over to the Resistance for me. You would have died for me.” Rey could feel the weight of her emotions on her voice; she knew it was wavering, she knew he heard it when it cracked under the weight. “Why?”

Kylo didn’t answer, instead, he growled and pivoted to walk around her. She blocked him again, hands raised as if he were a beast that could lash out at a moment’s notice. “The chance has passed for your prying questions in your quest to... what? Know why I am the monster that I am? It doesn’t matter. I refuse to entertain your curiosity as if I’m merely the schematics of an unknown starship. I don’t want to be your broken scavenger project. Did I not make myself clear enough? Leave.” It was cruel, it was antithetical to everything he had been before – everything she had refused to see. The resentment bled into his words, but Rey considered it progress. Anger was better than the void left by his fettered emotions.

She tilted her head to meet his gaze, but he closed his eyes instead, breathing mechanically. His resolve was crumbling, she knew it was; she just needed to break through the emotional barrier he had built around himself. “Why are you doing this, Ben? Please, talk to me.”

“It’s too late for that, Rey. I warned you,” His tone was nearly robotic, as if his desire to subjugate his emotions left his voice hollow and lifeless. “Don’t think of me, don’t talk to me, close the bond the moment it opens. Block me from your mind the best you can. I will do the same. With time, the bond should fade. I never want to see you again.” There was a heaviness to his last words, but Rey barely noticed beyond their meaning.
The first tears fell as she began to understand his sincerity. “Ben, you truly want that? I thought –”

“You thought wrong,” he interrupted curtly.

“No, I know you don’t want this,” she said, stepping closer to force him to look at her. If she could convince him to look at her, she knew he would not be strong enough to ignore her. Even at his most angry, he had never been capable of ignoring her. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I do,” he breathed. “If you don’t go, I will.” He moved to leave, but she grasped his arm. He recoiled from her touch as if lightning flowed through her veins. “Don’t!” he growled, turning his back to her, his visceral reaction leaving her more confused than before. Why was he doing this? It didn’t feel like hate.

“Ben, please! Talk to me! Tell me you hate me! Tell me I’m nothing! Tell me that you can’t stand my ideals! Tell me why you never want to see me again!” she pleaded. She craved for the moments when he was angry and brooding, or derisive and stonewalling, or haughty and insolent. At least then she knew how to respond. This had pulled the very foundation out from under her. “Please, be anything but this!”

“No, Rey.”

Rey stepped around him to force him to face her, but he had shut down, eyes closed, willing her away. She wasn’t foolish enough to reach for him again. “You wish to never speak to me again, and you won’t at least say why? Please, say something!”

“There’s nothing more to say,” he whispered.

Rey had promised herself after what happened at the temple that she would refuse the darkness. But the assurance of comfort was too strong in the face of the wound he was reopening in her heart. With a long, measured breaths, she allowed it in. “No, that’s not good enough,” her voice quivered. The tears spilled down her cheeks, chasing her falling hope. “Just when I was starting to believe that everything we felt in the hut was real. I don’t understand. You will not abandon me like everyone else without giving me a reason.”

“I’m not your parents,” he said, spitting the words out as if he hated them as much as she did. “I’m not abandoning you, because I was never more to you than your enemy.”
“Yes, you are! Ben, you’re turning your back on our bond just like you did your family!” she cried between sobs. She knew her reactionary words wouldn’t make him stay, but he hurt her, and anger was the only way to make the pain go away.

He shook his head, puffing his cheeks as he struggled with his control. “I didn’t. They turned their backs on me.”

“You left them!”

Kylo’s eyes raised to her, burning with rage. She had received her wish; he was angry. “Luke left his family to die, but you all worship him!”

“He saved them when it mattered,” she shouted back, “and he didn’t leave to join a legion of mass murderers!”

“No, he’d already done that,” he said, his voice as dark as his eyes.

“Fine, then what you’re saying is you’re no better than him?”

“I’m better off without this bond, and so are you. That is all that matters,” he rasped. His voice faltered, and she pushed harder, hoping his stone façade would crack.

“That’s not a reason, Ben. If honesty and truth are so important to you, then tell me why. Why are you turning your back on me? Why did you turn your back on your family, your name? You had everything I’ve ever wanted, and you threw it away like it was nothing... like they threw me away. I waited years for my family to return, but they never did. Your father came back for you, begged for you to come home, but you killed him instead. Why? And if you want so desperately to abandon our bond, too, why bother saving me? Why not kill me like you killed him? I deserve to know the truth! Just tell me why!”

“Get out!” he roared. An unstable blade split the void between them, illuminating his face in a crimson glow. His pupils were blown, his eyes wild and unhinged. Her words had their desired effect – his resolve was faltering, he was as unstable as his weapon.
“Not until you tell me the truth!” she demanded. “Why, Ben!”

“No, you are in no position to dictate.”

“You wouldn’t hurt me,” she challenged, stepping toward him confidently, “and we both know you can’t hurt me, not through the bond.”

His conflicting emotions flickered through eyes. “Would you bet your life on that?” he sneered, as she took another hesitant step toward him. He rolled the hilt in his wrist, emphasizing the physical barrier between them.

Rey noticed him track the tears down her face. He still cared, enough not to kill her, at least. “You would risk your life to save mine, just to kill me like this?”

“And you would rather die than leave?” he said through clenched teeth. “I’m evil. I am your enemy, a monster, a murderer... what else, Rey? I killed Han Solo, nearly killed FN-2187, destroyed countless villages like Tuanul and Concordia, massacred the entire Hosnian system. I am... Kylo Ren, the Supreme Leader of the First Order. What other legitimate reasons do you need to hate me? I’m nothing to you, remember? I am a threat to you and the Resistance. Stop fighting for the sake of fighting. I don’t want to turn. Just let it go.”

She shook her head defiantly. “Ben... please don’t. This is greater than you and me. The Force wants us to be bonded. What if the Force destined us to save the galaxy together?”

“The Force was wrong.”

“Think about what this bond means,” she pleaded.

His eyes grew cold and empty at her words.

“No, you think about it,” he snapped. “Think about what this truly is. What you thought you saw in that vision was not real; you won’t join me, and you can’t turn me. This bond was created and manipulated by Snoke to lure you into a trap for the map to Luke Skywalker. We were both fools and played directly into his hand. We have only ever been enemies, and that is all we will ever be. Think about the connections we’ve had over the bond. Aside from that night in the hut, every moment has been spent arguing or trying to kill each other. All you have ever done is fight me.
You have made your hatred for me crystal clear. Do I need to remind you?

“The first bond in the hut, you tried to shoot me. I shouldn’t have been surprised, since that was the first thing you did when we met and the third time you tried. The second connection in the rain you called me a ‘murderous snake’ and a ‘monster.’ The third, after my training session, you called me a liar after I told you what my uncle did to me. You could barely stand to look at me. The vision in the hut was a lie, but you saw my weakness for you, didn’t you? You figured out your use for me, and you came to turn me. But you didn’t expect that I wouldn’t be fooled by your desire to turn me to save your friends, so you betrayed me and left me for dead after I begged for you to stay with me. Our fifth connection on Crait, I tried to destroy the entire Resistance, and you shut me out.

“Our sixth connection, you stared at me like you hated that we were still bonded. Our seventh, I watched you and Luke attempt to breach my consciousness for secrets. Our eighth, you ignored me. Our ninth, you expressed your desire to be free of me. Our tenth, on the Command Bridge, I told you I would destroy you and your friends, and you called me a ‘traitor’ when you realized I had no light left in me. In the eleventh connection, in your room, you told me, and I quote, ‘I will free the galaxy of a monster, and they will thank me, because everyone hates you! The galaxy hates you! Your mother hates you! I hate you!’ That was after throwing droid parts at me and trying to kill me with my own lightsaber.”

“Ben, stop; that’s enough...”

“No, you wanted this conversation, then listen. The twelfth connection, you watched me execute those prisoners. The thirteenth, you were angry with me because you showed up in my room, in my bed, and I had the audacity to be in the same room as you. I tried to sever the connection and failed. The fourteenth was the visions, and if yours was anything like mine, you know why we need to end this bond. The fifteenth, my favorite. Kamino. I was going to end all of this, but you stopped me. You looked at me in ways I wish you never had. It still plagues me. But you wanted to keep me alive so you could use me. Didn't you? Isn’t that the reason you saved me in our sixteenth connection? Because the next time you saw me, the seventeenth connection, was just after Concordia. It was back to fighting again. Then in the eighteenth connection, you kissed the pilot, then claimed I tortured you with the bond. You told me I ruined everything and reminded me that you would never join me. You said I was evil, a monster, a murderer, a liar, and weak with lust for power. You said I was nothing to you, you could never love someone like me. You said you hated me. You hoped the Silencer would explode with me in it. Which it almost did, by the way. Did I miss anything?”

“Ben, please..”

“The nineteenth... I'm not going to pretend to know what that was. You cried on my shoulder, and, maybe, for a moment, you forgot who I was. Again, I was foolish enough to think maybe it would change. The twentieth you stayed asleep the entire time, but it still tortured me, because, for once,
you looked peaceful. The twenty-first connection, in the forest, I trusted you with my weapon, but
you couldn’t find a moment to swallow your animosity for me enough to thank me. In the twenty-
second bond, you were angry with me for knowing where the Resistance was. Then in the twenty-
third connection, you proved you didn’t trust me when you accused me of conspiring to hurt your
friends when I tried to help you. You wouldn’t trust me even as I committed treason for you. You
still believed I would lie to you. Then you tried to use yourself as a bargaining credit as if I wanted
you as my prisoner. I only ever wanted you by my side! I wanted you as my equal! But then your
attitude changed the second you realized I could help you, because me placing you above the First
Order despite the consequences is expected now, isn’t it? I told you I wouldn’t let you use me
anymore, and I told you I never wanted to see you again.”

“Ben, I didn’t…”

“Yet, in the twenty-fourth connection, you called out to me, begged me to help you. The pilot
discovered our bond, something I warned you would happen. Our bond puts your life at risk, the
next time you may not be so lucky. And now, here we are, the twenty-fifth connection. It is an
endless cycle of you showing kindness in an effort to use me and reacting violently when I do not
obey. And now you want to save this? After everything that has happened, endless connections
filled with your spiteful words and your desire for my death. Now this matters to you? You could
be killed for being seen with me, and every second we are together is a fight. What part of this is
worth saving? I have tried taking your anger in stride, reasoning with you, yelling back… none of it
works. There will always be a push and pull between us, like my parents, and I refuse to live my
life like them. We’ve found the way to separate the bond, now you can go back to your side of the
galaxy, and I can stay on mine, until our paths collide again. You’ll have your chance to kill me
soon enough.” Her chest ached as if each word was a weapon, piercing into her heart.

“I wouldn’t kill you, I care –”

“Liar, you don’t care!” he shouted, but the anger was gone. His weapon was no longer in a
defensive posture; his hand held it loosely at his side, all but abandoned in his unforgiving diatribe.
His cold demeanor had disappeared to reveal the broken man suffering underneath. “You want to
save me so you can save your friends. That is all I am to you!”

Rey stepped toward him, but he backed away. This is it, she realized. Ben truly hates me, and it’s
all my fault. She had been too angry, too scared, too weak against the pull of the darkness, to see
how much the bond meant to her. There had never been a moment when she considered
that he would walk away. He was still wrong, but now she realized, so was she. Just because he
aligned himself with an evil organization didn’t mean he deserved to be treated the way she had
treated him in her darkness, not when she cared for him as she did. He was an enemy of the
Resistance, but not to her. “I do want to save you Ben, but that’s why I care.”

He shook his head, staring down at his lightsaber. “You can’t save me.”
Rey was losing him, and she was helpless to stop it. There was something uniquely terrifying at not having control over a shared destiny. It was impossible for her to consider the consequences of destroying the bond as she argued with him, but the Force inside her seemed to understand. It was screaming in warning, clawing at her chest as if it intended to reach across the growing divide between them itself. This was beyond the Force, however, beyond hope. This was her worst fear realized, this was what his family had felt as they lost him. “You told me I’d never be alone.”

“So did you! But you made your choice, you left me, Rey, and now I’m doing what we should have done after Crait.”

“You can look me in the eyes right now and tell me you want to end our bond?” she whispered through tears. He disengaged his weapon and held her gaze.

“Yes,” he said, his eyes tearing in earnest. There was a growing pit of despair inside her like a poison eating away at her. She feared when it was done, there would be nothing recognizable of her left.

“You never want to see me again? You truly don’t care?” she choked.

“Will you leave the Resistance?” he asked quietly, knowing the answer. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. She was supposed to be demanding ultimatums, she was supposed to ask him to leave the First Order. She shook her head through tears. “Goodbye, Rey.” He moved past her down the corridor.

“Ben, please. I saw our future when we touched hands, I came to bring you home, but you broke my heart. I was angry and cruel, but I thought you deserved every bit of it for not choosing me! Yet through all of it, you never gave up on me! Why? I was beginning to think that maybe you wouldn’t leave me, then maybe you would stay... I believed you wouldn't abandon me as they did. I am a fool. You're no different, are you? I've only ever been your enemy. I truly am alone.”

_This bond between us would have never worked, because you would have always pushed me away. You were too scared of getting hurt again not to, but I can’t kill the past for you_, his voice whispered across the connection. He paused, his entire body rigid and trembling. She waited for the outburst that never came. “Goodbye, Rey,” he repeated, though his voice was barely a whisper. He refused to face her, and the darkness ignited her blood with rage. She summoned the book of Force bonds that he had gifted her from the direction of her bed.
“I let you in! I let you in! I have never let anyone in. Not like this! You want to betray me and our bond, fine! Take this back!” she screamed, throwing the book at him, which skidded to a stop between his boots. “You'll need it so you can run from our bond like you've run from everything else. You're a coward. But you want another enemy, Kylo? Fine. You won't have a friend in this entire galaxy. If you walk away, I hope you remember what I did to you the last time we were enemies!” The rage rolled off her in waves. If she had a working lightsaber, she would have challenged him to a duel right there.

Kylo paused for a moment as he collected the book. She expected him to leave without another glance, but he pivoted slowly, a strange look on his face. His glossy eyes widened, his lips parted to allow passage of his stuttered breath. Was it surprise? Horror? Grim realization? But she couldn't mistake the pained expression transforming his face as he turned back. He walked further down the corridor, leaving her in a mix of fury and despair. When he was almost out of sight, he suddenly pivoted and drove the book into the wall, roaring in a tortured agony. The Force chose that moment to take pity on them both and snapped them apart again.
Chapter End Notes

Mild Violence

Kylo slams a book into a wall
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
“If you walk away, I hope you remember what I did to you the last time we were enemies!”

As Kylo bent to collect the book that had slid between his boots, he was reminded of a memory from a lifetime ago; a pair of golden dice sliding between his retreating father’s boots.

If you leave, you’re dead to me! He had screams.

Kylo glanced back at Rey, remorse shattering his resolve. I’m no better than him... He turned with the fear that history was repeating itself, fearing the heartbreak he would see in her eyes that mirrored the heartbreak that was tearing his chest apart. But there was no heartbreak in her eyes, only darkness. She hates me. The realization cut him deeper than he thought possible, but it steeled his resolve. He convinced himself it was for the best. So he shut his eyes and forced himself to move forward. He left her behind.

I believed you wouldn’t abandon me as they did. I am a fool. You’re no different, are you?

Her words echoed relentlessly in his mind as he remembered his own furious shouts toward the man that abandoned him.

Turn around! At least look me in the eyes when you admit that all I am is a burden to you. You don’t want me! You are abandoning me with someone I barely know!

Before he considered the consequences, he was pivoting, his arm crossing his body as he propelled the book he had given her – the book she had carelessly discarded as he had done to her – into the nearest wall. The pages fell apart around him as he leaned his forehead against the cool durasteel, his dark bangs falling over his eyes. What have I done?

She has the Resistance. She will be fine. He imagined it; she would concentrate her efforts on training, on becoming the fierce warrior they both knew she could be. One day, she’d meet him on a skywalk, or a cliff, or a barren desert. She would kill him as he had killed his father. She would
have her family, she would find someone she didn’t hate, and she would be happy. He was doing her a favor. He was doing *himself* a favor.

*She is systematically destroying me piece by piece, and I let her do it. I’ve tried everything to have her accept me for who I am. The only thing left is to shut her out and be the enemy she needs me to be. It’s for the best.* He could do this. It was nothing he couldn’t survive. The churning in his stomach and tightness in his chest were all too familiar. He’d had enough practice; he *could* do this. The ache was just loneliness. He knew loneliness. He could survive loneliness.

This pain. This was why he never allowed anyone close. This was why it was easier to be alone. As he pressed himself off the wall, he had half a mind to leave the destruction in his wake. He didn't much care for possessions. But that book symbolized the only good thing he'd had in his life. He couldn't bear to lose both the last and only reminder of her and his reason for letting her go. Collapsing to the floor in an action that was not becoming of the Supreme Leader, he hastily collected all the detached pages.

By the time he was done, his resolution and anger had ebbed. He walked in a daze, focusing on each step forward, refusing to allow his mind to contemplate the truth of what he had done. The corridors blended together, the lights blurring into a numbing haze, and the sound of his boots echoing off the wall consumed his senses. He followed his feet absently until they led him to his chamber door. It opened for him, and as he walked through, he didn’t focus on how empty it felt.
Loneliness at the Resistance

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
For three days Rey tried her best to keep herself busy. The Resistance had plenty of equipment salvaged from the old base that required rewiring; she could throw herself into work — into surviving — as she had always done. The others, however, complicated her plans. They looked at her as if she were a lothcat in a herd of nerf. Their whispers of mistrust followed her down the corridors. Before, they had seen her powers as a gift, but now she began to understand Kylo’s warning.

Stop thinking about him.

No matter what she did, her thoughts would wander back to him. Everything reminded her of him: the vial, the flower, the scar, the ship, the other members, the broken lightsaber, the Jedi texts, the droid parts, the blaster, the bed where he had sat, the bootprints on the dusty stone where he had stood, the corridor where he had lain dying, the room where she had accused him of bringing the First Order to Barkhesh, the temple, the steps, the stars, the jungle, the dark place for him in her mind, the echo of his voice in her dreams. There was a lake she dreamt of every night and she could feel his energy there. It was tormenting.

On day two, Finn asked her if she had killed Kylo. He had asked her with a smile, clearly anticipating from her pensive silence that something must have happened. His happiness as she struggled to come to terms with her loss only deepened her misery. No one understood, not even Kylo. Withholding tears, she told Finn that the bond had been destroyed. He didn’t question her further, though his smile faded, and he continued to glance at her with concern throughout dinner. There seemed to be a question behind his eyes whenever she glanced back, but he didn’t dare speak it. Rose looked between Finn and her with concern, but she held her tongue as well. After the base, what was there to say? They didn’t trust her. That was why they looked at her like any moment she might crumble or explode, why they whispered when they thought she wasn’t looking, why they didn’t say a word to her other than superficial drivel.

She hated it.

She hated avoiding Leia as well, but what could she say to her? Kylo was gone, forever lost to darkness. She had failed to realize how important saving him had become to her until the Force stole him away across the galaxy. He was by far the most antagonizing man in the galaxy and lived in opposition to everything she fought for, but the thought that he would willingly leave had never crossed her mind. The darkness had convinced her of a great many untruths. Being inside the temple with the others only furthered her misery, so she took off into the jungle. No one would care that she was gone anyway.
There was something freeing about being on her own again. Physical training was exhausting and mind-numbing. She practiced forms with her staff, climbed trees, jumped the expanse between cliffs, and ran until she couldn’t breathe. It reminded her of being back on Jakku. The familiarity of it was comforting.

There was no one to disappoint, no one watching her for the slightest misstep, no one deciding for her who she was supposed to be. She didn’t have to hide the darkness that surrounded her energy like a storm cloud. She loved her friends, but she couldn’t stand the look of concern or fear in their eyes anymore.

There were monsters hiding in the jungle, she knew there were, but she was not disquieted by their presence. Monsters would never fear her, would never be disappointed by what she was. She knew where she stood with monsters, she knew what they wanted from her, and that unambiguous danger was comforting. Certainly, it was simpler in the jungle, where friend was friend, and foe was foe. She almost felt at home there.

When she had nearly collapsed in fatigue from her intensive training, she walked the paths she had scrambled over only a few short days before. She crossed a stream with white, glittering rocks, the water soaking into her boots and tingling on her skin. She passed the stack of rocks she had made into a makeshift grave for both the Jugalor and bat, the hunter and the hunted entombed together in death. She crossed the clearing with the vines where the plant had ensnared her ankle in their trap. The severed, thorny shoots still lay dead and shriveled on the forest floor.

She reached a split in the path and followed the more overgrown trail to the largest flowers she had ever seen. Her eyes wandered up the six- to ten-meter stalks along the path to the beautiful marbled petals from giant blooms that were larger than the inside of her AT-AT. Reds and oranges, purples and yellows, blues and pinks swirled together in beautiful displays. She ran her fingers along the long seeds of domed, shimmering plants that reminded her of stars and watched the seeds take flight and glisten against the bright turquoise sky in a kaleidoscope of colors. The wind swept through her hair, and she breathed in the smell of the damp red soil and the sweet scent of the most dangerous crimson blooms. A young Borgle bat weaved through branches in the canopy, screeching as it was lost in the darkness of the shadows cast by the trees, and Rey smiled.

It was a beautiful distraction, until the sound of the jungle disappeared. She felt the tell-tale signs of another connection. His energy grew in her mind, the bond grew taut between them, she knew a connection was imminent. “Ben?” She spun where she stood, searching for him. There was a sharp snap in her mind, and the sounds of the jungle returned. It had happened at least once an hour, day and night, since he had shut her out. There was no sign that the bond was dying as he suggested. Every time she felt the snap of him shutting the door, a different emotion emerged.
First, it was disbelief, that he truly didn’t want to see her ever again. When the bond snapped shut, that was his choice. The man had wanted to die because of his loneliness at the First Order; was she worse than that? Then, it was something like sorrow that it was over; she had failed him, failed his mother, failed the Resistance. Then it was anger; how dare he shut her out of the bond, he wasn’t innocent in any of this, he was the mass-murdering leader of an evil organization. This time, it had been hope, again. After such a beautiful moment in the forest, she ignorantly believed that he had come back. She had lain awake at night, imagining the words she would say to him again. They weren’t all kind, but they needed to be said. Now that she’d had the time to think about it all, she wanted the chance to say them.

Guided by her feet, Rey stumbled upon the ruins of the old base. It seemed different without the stormtroopers and the entirety of the Resistance taking cover inside it. She could almost feel the vibrations of the explosions, could almost smell the smoke and dedlandite, could almost hear the blasterfire and screams, as if the sensations had been forever imprinted upon the Force there. She didn’t know what she was looking for until she found the remains of an orange and white astromech.

She had lost her parents, had lost Han, had lost Luke, had lost Kylo to darkness, but perhaps not everything had to stay gone. With tears of determination blurring her vision, she began painstakingly gathering each wire and bolt from the debris. Controlling the darkness and moving on from a complicated bond; those were things she could not achieve yet. But Rey knew what she was good at, she could fix Beebee-Ate. Not only for herself, but for Poe and the Resistance, whom she failed with her treachery. The bond was gone; she could earn their trust again. What Kylo did; it was for the best. The ache behind her ribs would fade. At least, that is what she convinced herself.

Rey was surprised when a hand grasped the same piece of charred metal she had reached for in the rubble. She startled, before pivoting to see the apologetic grin of her best friend. “What are you doing here?” she asked, and she knew it sounded harsher than she intended, but he took it in stride.

“I’m sorry, Rey,” he said, his eyes looking more tired and red-rimmed than she had remembered them being when she left. “I should have trusted you. And I shouldn’t have given you space the last few days, not when I knew you needed me.”

“I’m sorry, too.” Her lip pulled up into a wan smile. “I shouldn’t have put the Resistance at risk.”

Finn’s eyes glanced down at the droid parts in her hands. “I know you spent most of your life doing things alone, but you know you don’t have to do that here, right? I’m here for you, no matter what.” His smile transformed into something more consoling. In that moment, she was reminded that he was not only a champion of the Resistance and enemy to her bondmate. In the turmoil of being pulled in two different directions, she had forgotten just who he was to her.
Rey said the only thing that was meaningful enough in that moment; nothing. Instead, she wrapped her arms around her friend, and he held her against him. He was not just another person she cared for whom she needed to protect from the First Order. He was the first person to ever care for her; he was the first person to come back for her. She didn’t have to endure this by herself.

You are not alone, echoed in her mind. Kylo may have left her, but she wasn’t alone, not with Finn by her side. He may not have understood her like Kylo had, he may not have sympathized with the despair she buried deep from the loss of Kylo and their bond, but he would support her.

“I want to be here for you too,” a voice said over her shoulder. Rose. “If you want me to be.” Rey opened one of her arms in invitation, and Rose joined their embrace. “We can start off by helping you rebuild Beebee-ate.”

“Together?” Rey asked through tears.

“Together,” Finn assured her.
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The officer was speaking to him. He couldn’t remember the man’s name, nor did he care. Behind the mask, Kylo could see the officer turn to him apprehensively, his body tilting away from him as if he were a rabid beast on a short chain. It was evident he expected an answer.

*What are they going on about?*

Was it the planets they were mining for precious resources? Unlikely. They never cared to ask his opinions on that before. Was it another Outer Rim rebellion? Improbable. He hadn’t argued with Hux through holomessage over the negotiations. Another mass-murdering weapon? Doubtful. He had already ended Hux’s hopes of another Starkiller. From the pinched look on Hux’s face, it was *something* he had done… or not done… or done in a method that differed from the general’s own master plan. Speaking of the general, he had turned to face him as well.

“What Supreme Leader, would you care to respond?” The frustration was plainly evident underneath his saccharine tone.

Kylo stared at him in silence. *He* wouldn’t be the one to tell Hux he wasn’t listening because of his perpetual focus on life without *her*. It was almost laughable; he had existed his entire life without *her*. As it turned out, however, it was far easier to miss something when he didn’t *know* he was missing it.

Hux’s jaw clenched tightly as he prompted the Supreme Leader *again*. “To the concerns of lifting your sanctions on Kessel?”

“I thought I made myself clear,” Kylo sighed, drumming his fingers on the table. “The First Order does not support slavery or the spice trade.”

He knew there would be a considerable blow-back from his sanctions, but it was necessary. The corruption on Kessel was the reason the Republic had failed the galaxy. The Republic had allowed Wookiees and other sentients to be enslaved and used for the spice industry. Their life expectancy in the mines was an average of six months to two years for a race that lived hundreds of years. Millions suffered and died in those mines, and on other worlds throughout the galaxy, but somehow *he* was the monster for desiring to overthrow the Republic.

They would never have allowed those sanctions, because the politicians made their money from
the spice trade. The spice trade created chaos, not order; unless the masses becoming indolent parasites incapable of demanding change or rising up against the corruption of the Republic was their definition of order. **Follow the money,** his mother had told him. How right she had been. If only she had realized that the Republic was not the answer to affecting change.

“With all due respect, my lord,” Hux said, tugging at his collar with impatience. “Kessel is a **valuable** ally.” Hux evidently believe Kylo would bend on the issue, which was presumptuous, considering their volatile relationship. Kylo would sign off on weapons and aggressive negotiation tactics, but *not* this.

“Was,” Kylo corrected imperiously.

The general’s face pinched in irritation. “Excuse me?”

“Was,” Kylo repeated, “Kessel *was* a valuable ally. They will likely cease all funding following the sanctions.”

“Supreme Leader, you can’t –”

“I can, because I am the Supreme Leader.” Growing tired of watching the red-headed man sputter in indignation, Kylo stood from the table and turned toward the door.

“Supreme Leader!” Hux shouted after him.

“Excuse me,” the general said politely to the other officers in the room before Kylo heard the clacking of the man’s boots as he stormed after him. “Supreme Leader!”

Kylo did his best to maintain a pace that exuded authority rather than escape. “General?”

“That is the third meeting you’ve walked out of in as many days! You can’t –”

Kylo clenched his jaw to temper his anger. The fool deigned to test his patience *again* by forcing him to repeat himself. It was a simple concept to understand; he could do whatever he damn well wanted, because he was the Supreme Leader. Everything in him wanted to stop and choke the
vermin so he wouldn’t have to hear another syllable from his irritating voice. Unfortunately, he had a job to do. “Do not presume to dictate what I can and cannot do, General. I have other duties required of me.”

Hux clearly had no self-preservation instincts. “And how do you suggest you perform your supreme duties when you’ve spent days holed up in your chambers?”

“My apologies,’ Kylo replied. “I presumed you were aware of these extraordinarily convenient new inventions called the holopad and comlink for such occasions when I was otherwise unreachable.”

“Unreachable?” Hux huffed mirthlessly. “You’re not tied up with on-world negotiations – a responsibility you have now delegated to me after that incident with the Quarren on Mon Cala. You sit in your quarters with a BB unit, that is not how the Supr –”

“Likewise, do not presume to dictate how I should delegate responsibilities or allocate my time.” His voice was weary even behind the mask. “Know your place.” All of it was true, of course. He had delegated the duty of negotiations to Hux. He knew the general’s philosophy behind galactic domination differed from his own, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care anymore. His former master had never attended meetings; he told them what to do, and they listened. It wasn’t his absence that bothered the general, it was their difference of opinion when he did attend.

By the sound of the tut behind him, Hux was affronted by his statement. It wasn’t enough, unfortunately, for the man to stop following him. “I know my place and presume to intervene when it affects the functionality of the First Order.”

This was ground Kylo was confident enough to battle on. “Tell me, General,” he said evenly, “which part of the Order is not functioning?”

“There are rebellions –”

“There will always be rebellions.”

“Well,” Hux huffed. “What do you presume to do about them, Supreme Leader?”

Kylo smirked behind the mask. “You question my ability to perform my duties, but I thought it was you whose responsibility it was to attend on-world negotiations.”
The general stopped, and Kylo felt victory pump through his veins. *Foolish child,* he could imagine his former master castigating his behavior. It was beneath him to argue with the weak-willed, but he found gratification behind it, nonetheless.

Whether he liked it or not, he needed Hux, or he would lose the support of his army. That didn’t stop him from riling up the man as often as he could afford. If Kylo was patient, there would come a time when the general was no longer useful. When it arose, Kylo would take great pleasure in eliminating him. For the time being, the general needed to be reminded where his place was. Presently, Hux’s place was behind him as the distance between them grew. Kylo was nearly free.

Then all at once, he could feel the prickling over his skin, the tightness at the base of his skull, the sound fading from the destroyer. He stopped and closed his eyes. The sounds and smells of a distant forest invaded his senses. Without hesitation, he found the place in his mind where the bond still connected him to Rey, and he severed the connection. The sound returned, but his stomach was in knots. He hadn’t been thinking of her this time, which only made the alternative worse to consider. *Why would she care?* Still, he found himself biting back tears, never more grateful for the mask than at that moment. Why hadn’t it gotten any easier? Why wasn’t the bond disappearing?

“Supreme Leader, are you well?” To say Hux’s question arose from concern was to say that a Krayt Dragon watching a wounded Bantha arose from concern. Even the look in his eyes was predatorial.

Kylo turned to stare at the man. What could he say? His insides were fractured and falling apart piece by piece. He felt as if death had already taken him but left his soul behind in this useless body. He couldn’t decide whether he wanted to find the weapon that destroyed the entirety of Malachor and reproduce it on a galactic scale, or whether he wanted to find a machine to alter time and kill his grandfather before he ever left Tatooine. Both seemed beneficial to the greater good in the long run, because he would no longer have to live in a galaxy where their fates were intertwined.

“Supreme Leader?” Hux cleared his throat, stepping closer, waiting for an answer until he realized it would never come. “Are you well?”

Kylo wanted to rip his helmet off and throw it at the general. He wanted to scream until he couldn’t breathe. He wanted to run until his legs gave out, fight until his he couldn’t lift his weapon, destroy everything the Force could touch until the entire galaxy was consumed by his wrath. But he wasn’t “well.” He was tired of all of it. He just wanted it to end, and there was no end in sight. “*You* won’t be if you continue to irritate me with these questions.”
Hux did not follow as Kylo gathered energy from the Force to storm away. His boots guided him down the corridors back to his quarters. The other officers and troopers avoided him at all cost, diverting their eyes and choosing alternate routes. He used to enjoy how the others had cowered from him, but not anymore. *You fear me, knowing nothing about me, other than what anyone has ever seen in me.* They would never know him; he would never allow anyone in again. It only ended in pain. It was easier to crave power than to crave people; power never lied, power never betrayed, power never used *him*.

The door opened to his chambers, but there was no reprieve. Blue began his line of questioning again. The droid chirped brightly, asking him how the meeting went. He was always so *interested* in what Kylo did as if it weren’t… “Pointless,” he answered. “I don’t remember what it was about.” He moved to the wardrobe to begin peeling away the layers of the Supreme Leader.

Blue chirped again, asking his favorite question. *Why? Better question, why does it matter?* Kylo pressed the release on his helmet. It irritated him that the servomotors no longer hissed and sparked. He tossed the mask onto the table, watching it upset the other objects.

“Because I wasn’t listening.”

Another beep. It was a reasonable question. *Why bother attending the meeting?* The agitation boiled under his skin, but he knew it wasn’t directed at the droid. He removed his gloves one by one, refusing to allow his mind to wander to when he had removed them before.

“Because I have to go.”

Another response from the droid. *Why?* He swallowed his first reaction, tempering his tone.

“Because I’m the Supreme Leader.”

Kylo should have expected the droid would repeat himself. *Why?* It was a simple question; the answer shouldn’t have been complicated, but it was. Explaining complicated concepts to a droid with the mentality of a child challenged his views on topics he wasn’t prepared to contemplate, but he never failed to answer the droid’s questions. This time, he couldn’t find it in him to give Blue an adequate answer. *Why am I Supreme Leader? Because I…* His fingers began on his cloak, removing it with more force than necessary. *Because I am.* It didn’t matter *why* anymore. He was what he was, and there was no going back. He slumped down into the chair at his desk.
“Because I chose to be,” he said. “I wanted to be Supreme Leader, Blue.”

The droid, however, was not satisfied with his answer. Kylo had barely begun on his first boot when Blue repeated the question.

Why had he wanted to become Supreme Leader? He’d never planned to kill the creature he believed to be Snoke until… until he was forced to choose. He’d never considered taking the throne until he looked upon his master’s fallen corpse. At the time, he was certain of his reasoning; he believed he knew how the Supreme Leader should rule, and he could do better to create order in the galaxy. He had believed he could make a difference, but his motives and desires had shifted. What he was doing – it all seemed…pointless. Even if he succeeded in creating the New Order he had imagined, it meant nothing. The droid had prevailed in encouraging him to accept that truth, but he still couldn’t understand why. It should have been everything he wanted. It had been.

“I wanted to change the galaxy,” he whispered.

A message pinged on his datapad, distracting him from his reverie. It was another encrypted message from outside the Order. He knew there was no one else it could be. Kylo had been expecting the message, even if he pretended that he needed time to decide whether to open it. He didn’t; he had already prepared the holomaps traced with the navigational routes, after all. He just couldn’t bring himself to open it, because it was one step closer to the end.

The message was brief, one question: Shall I take this as your admission of the truth? The words only served to twist the dagger deeper into the aching wound left behind in her absence. He forced himself to reply, choosing his words carefully in the chance that the eyes of the First Order were watching.

Take it however you want it to be. Seventy-two hours is all I can promise. You know my conditions.

Attaching the maps to the message, he made his choice. As he stared at the receipt of its delivery, he exhaled slowly. It was almost over. He deleted the message, as if its significance would dissipate with it, and stood from the desk. He set the boots in their place, righted the helmet and reorganized the table that had become the latest victim of his agitation. When he was finished, he turned, staring out the viewport.

It was an old habit – staring out at the stars, searching for people who would never come back to him. He couldn’t help searching for the Seitia Sector. The droid softly whirred a question behind him. Blue shared a propensity with… his former bondmate to ask the most upending questions when he was at his most vulnerable. With his family or the First Order, he could manipulate the
conversation to his will; with Blue and her, he could never gain his footing. This question was no different.

Blue caught him staring out the viewports on one of their nightly walks around the ship – the only occasion Kylo would voluntarily leave his chambers – and the droid asked him why he did that. He had explained to that droid what he had never told another soul other than two ghosts from a temple he refused to name. Staring up at the stars was how he had occupied his time on those long nights, waiting for his family. The past was easy to tell the droid, because he never judged nor pitied him for it.

What Blue had done instead, however, was much more destabilizing. He had asked what Kylo was still waiting for, what he was missing? He asked his questions as if there were easy answers. Who was he missing? Someone he shouldn’t. In his weakness, he had told the droid about Rey. It made this moment as he stood before the viewport, staring off at the Seitia Sector, more tormenting. The droid had repeated the question he had asked numerous times since he had shut out the bond. Was he missing her? The droid’s questions were always disarmingly simple; merely an attempt to understand the complexities of the human mind. The answers never were.

Did he miss her? It doesn’t matter. What did matter was he should have been thriving without her constant interference. What he couldn’t comprehend was why he had lost all desire to rule once she was gone. The pain inside was growing worse. How could nothing from the bond be worse than her hatred? It was for the best, what he had done; they were better off without the bond. Still, he found himself responding.

“Yes.”
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 650,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
The *Finalizer* had definite day and night cycles. While the destroyer traversed the darkness of space, it was the only way to differentiate one day from the next. The third shift had reduced personnel tasked to operate on dimmed lighting and “comm-silence” protocol, but if Kylo had been a stormtrooper, it would have been the shift he preferred. The night cycle made it easier to blend into the shadows. The corridors were empty, the Force was quieter, and most of the other officers were asleep, which meant there was no one to bother him. It should have been easy to count the passing days when he wandered the corridors at night, but they all blended together, like ink on parchment in the rain. He couldn’t remember the last time he slept. He couldn’t remember whether it was a week or a month since he’d shut out the bond. The scratches in the wall continued to grow, but not by his own efforts. When he had given up, Blue had continued the ritual in his stead.
Kylo wasn’t certain if it was the lack of sleep or avoiding any sentient being with a pulse, but something in him had changed. He didn’t feel anything anymore. It should have given the peace he had always craved, but he just felt… hollow. Lifeless.

Blue loyally rolled by his side as they walked back from yet another trip to the archives. He should have felt something; a plan was starting to formulate in the chaotic thoughts in his head. Stopping Sidious had become his life’s mission, and the latest research had finally guided him in the right direction. He longed to feel victory surge through him, to feel the power and strength it delivered to him, to feel anything. Blue had been excited enough for the both of them, and he decided that would have to do. The droid chirped joyfully as they walked, and Kylo considered his next step. He decided that he would attend the meeting with Hux at five hundred hours to maintain appearances. It was more important than ever that he kept his general close while he followed through with his plan.

It was then that the Force rolled through him. There was a familiar twist in his stomach as he recognized the forewarning to an imminent connection. He closed his eyes to locate the bond and sever it, but he was distracted as sound traveled down the connection. His breath hitched as he heard her voice. No, not just her voice, her laugh. His eyes popped open and he saw her.

“No!” she laughed, pointing at something. When he concentrated enough the destroyer faded away to her temple room. She was kneeling next to another woman as they both worked companionably to assemble a partially-constructed droid – a BB unit. She was pointing behind the traitor as he searched through tools on the floor. “No… no… no… the red one… no… next to that one… no… next to that one… no!” Giggling, she continued to point as he lifted different tools to show her. It was exactly what Kylo knew would happen – she would be happier without their bond – but that didn’t stop the ache in his chest. She was laughing, she was smiling, she was happy.

He could pinpoint the second she noticed his presence. It was the second she froze, her smile dropped away, and she slowly turned toward him. Before he could witness the hatred in her eyes, he lowered his own and found the connection. With a practiced swiftness, he severed it. For several moments he stood in the center of the corridor, afraid to raise his eyes. When he did, only Blue was staring back at him. As a flood of something painful swept through him, Kylo took off toward his chambers. The droid beeped a string of questions, but he couldn’t answer. He couldn’t breathe. “Not now Blue, please,” he managed. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt anything, and he didn’t know what to do with what was boiling up inside him. He felt alive again; alive, he knew, because it felt as if he were dying.

When the door to his quarters opened, his eyes flickered up to view the receiving hall of his antechambers. He stopped just inside, his feet refusing to carry him any further. His legs only held his weight with assistance from the Force. Blue whirred curiously, hesitating for a moment, before sensing Kylo’s desire to be alone. Without another sound, the droid continued further into his chambers.
He had only once sat upon the throne, when the bond had connected them again after Crait. There were days he would pause as he left his quarters, staring at the object that symbolized his title. He convinced himself the reason he refused to touch it was that it seemed too ostentatious, but he couldn't overlook the fear that spiked as he stared at the stone. He knew why; the turmoil he had felt when first taken his place on the throne, the wrongness of it, he feared what would happen if he felt it again.

The throne loomed in front of him, menacingly, mockingly. It had been everything he had wanted, but the very sight of it agitated him. Still, he found he was inexplicably drawn to it, his feet unable to obey his commands until he came to rest in front of it. He noticed the carmine hue reflecting off the translucent surface of the Wayland Marble. It was only then he realized he had ignited his lightsaber.

His fingers tightened around the hilt as he studied the carved stone that symbolized every sacrifice he had made in the name of revenge. It was insignificant, hollow, and meaningless. Like his mask, once a symbol of his destiny, it tormented and taunted him. He stared at the throne with renewed volatility tensing through him, images of Rey’s face and laughter, his father, his mother, the other Jedi students flashing through his mind. His pulse stuttered as the familiar fire surged through his veins. He knew the fuse had been lit; there would be only one way to satisfy the dark hunger. Apoplectic, his eyes glazed over, darkness dug its claws in deep.

And then he snapped.

The crimson blade crackled and sparked as it slashed into the object representing his torment. The plasma burned through the stone, leaving nothing but mangled destruction in its wake. Kylo’s hands were calculated and precise, led purely by instinct and training. The glowing pieces of the throne became an orange blur as he rampaged through the broken room. The sound of his writhing pulse consumed his senses, every beat a torturous reminder of the suffering he had condemned others to and been condemned to. He hadn’t realized that he was screaming until his throat burned like the molten remnants of what once was the receiving hall.

He stood in the center of the chaos, shoulders slumped, his lightsaber grasped loosely at his side. With his chest surging with adrenaline, his eyes surveyed the wreckage of the room as the hurricane of emotions inside him – momentarily tempered by the physical exertion – now returned in full force. His muscles trembled with the desire... hunger... demand... for more destruction. Rey’s heartbroken, tear-streaked face when he had destroyed the bond and her – equally agonizing – laughing, smiling face when they were last connected, flashed through his mind. That was enough to reignite the fire inside him.

Remorse, sorrow, and despair tore at his resolve, corrupting the Force around him. Had another
Force-sensitive been in his vicinity, they would have found themselves drowning in the heaviness of the energy around him, his emotions spiraling wildly and out-of-control into the Force. The more desperate he became to fetter them, the more powerful they became. The spiraling emotions created a whirlwind of Force, whipping violently around the room. His self-loathing flashed like a spark, and fire exploded from his fingertips. In an instant, the whirlwind around him had ignited into an inferno.

“This is new,” he whispered, the words drowned by the raging fire blasting around him.

Fire and embers licked the surfaces of the room as the blazing winds of the Force flared around him. Discipline and rationality had been suppressed by the passion of darkness, but somewhere deep inside was a scream, begging him to come to his senses, warning him of the danger of such destructive Forces on a pressurized ship with an oxygen-rich life support system.

No, it wasn’t a voice inside. The voice was echoing from behind him. He turned, volatile and unhinged as the Force seared through the room around him. There were flashing red beacons above him, alarms blaring in warning, personnel sprinting frantically down the corridors. Hux stood frozen in the door opening, his eyes wide in terror. A squad of stormtroopers guarded him, weapons trained on Kylo.

“Ren! Stop or they’ll be obligated to defend this destroyer!” Hux shouted over the fiery winds. Kylo was beyond reason, though, self-preservation the furthest thought from his mind. As were his mental defenses. The familiar energy in the Force was suffocated by the ravaging winds, the crackling that announced a new arrival coalesced into the surrounding flames. He was too distracted by his general’s presence to recognize the presence of any other.

“Ben, stop!” The words echoed from a memory he had long ago repressed. He turned away from his general, toward the shout emanating from inside the room. Rey. The anger burning in her eyes raged stronger than the fire rippling from his fingertips. Even in her anger, her light in the Force enveloped him. He was irritatingly aware of the inexplicable calm her mere presence rendered his volatile emotions. This time, he actively fought against it. This time, he didn’t want it.

He searched deep into the darkness for the strength he required, desperately craving to drive her away. The whirlwind intensified as it fed on the swelling darkness. To her credit, Rey did not flinch as the fire surrounded her as well. Her fierce stare remained fixed upon his. Before he realized her intentions, she was rifling through his thoughts. By the time he understood, it was too late.

“Fire at will,” the general said behind him.
Chapter End Notes

Mild violence

Kylo destroys a reception hall

Threat of violence

Hux threatens to shoot Kylo for destroying said reception hall
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
When the Force connected them during his fiery Force-outburst, Rey was still furious at him for abandoning their bond and continually shutting her out. Yes, she had doubted him, but he was their enemy; he had admitted to keeping vital secrets from her. He had given her no reason to trust him. He had chosen to become Supreme Leader rather than save her friends. What was she supposed to think? The truth was, he thought he could turn her. When she wouldn’t join him, he tried to kill her. When she wouldn’t accept him as the Supreme Leader, he shut her out. If he wanted to be evil, she shouldn’t care, even if part of her did. He had chosen his path. She did care, however, if he died. Not for herself, but for his mother.

Rey had never seen a fire-storm before, but she did understand the feeling of losing control. With ten blasters pointed at his head and an entire room reduced to embers by winds of fire, Kylo clearly had lost it, and she tried to help him the only way she knew how. Using the bond to learn how to sever his mind from consciousness, she intervened to prevent the wrath of his general. And she would have gone back to ignoring him if she hadn’t accidentally witnessed a memory in the chaotic seconds before he lost consciousness.

She hadn’t meant to access it; in her inexperience with the skill, she had pushed through his mind – through his memories – to sever the connection. In the darkest reaches, just before the last thread of consciousness, she found memories of uncountable deaths by his hand. She saw Snoke, she saw Han, and she saw her memory of her parents flying away on her ship.

Only, it wasn’t her memory; it was different. Just as she had seen in her nightmares, she heard herself scream as she watched the ship fly away. Her memory usually ended with her vision growing red. But this memory continued further than she remembered, as a bright white light exploded across her vision. When it died away, small pieces of the ship were falling to the ground like meteors. Young Rey was screaming, but this scream was different – this was a cry of mourning. Before the memory could finish, she had severed the final thread, and Kylo had collapsed in unconsciousness.

Rey, however, had not slept since.

To possess that complete memory, Kylo had either seen her parents’ death in his vision in the hut, or he’d been there. Either way, he had lied to her. Kylo had told her they were buried in the desert on Jakku. Why had he never told her that the ship exploded? That voice inside told her the answer to that question was of unimaginable consequence. Rey knew her bondmate; if he had purposefully omitted that detail, it was deliberate. The only question was, who or what was he protecting?
Pacing the corridors, she found the dark place in her mind that was their bond. And waited. She knew he was awakening, because she felt his energy strengthen in her mind. With a mental nudge against that energy, she was pulled back to the destruction of that receiving hall. When she appeared, he had barely pushed himself up from where he lay on the dais, his hands shackled in binders. She stood silent, watching him. She didn’t care what he did to the bond, as long as he waited until after she received her answers.

Before he could sever the connection, she spoke those five life-altering words: “What happened to my parents?” Instead of the anger and resentment she had felt in him when he severed their connections, she sensed an overwhelming fear flood the bond. It was all the confirmation she needed; he knew there was more to the strange memory. He was hiding something.

“Ben, you can shut me out, you can never speak to me again. But I’m not leaving until you tell me the truth,” she demanded, though she could feel an unease growing inside her. A little voice told her she didn’t want to know. She refused to listen; she had come this far, and he held the key. “I saw your memories. I saw their ship exploding. That's not what I remember.”

Part of her wondered if he would cruelly shut her out again, but he just stood there, staring at the floor. He chewed his lip anxiously before his eyes met hers. “I know.”

“Which memory is the truth? I don't understand.” She could feel his reluctance to answer her in the bond. Being apart had done nothing to weaken the strength of the bond, and she would have admitted to herself how comforting it was to feel it again – to feel him again – if her mind wasn’t solely focused on the past. There was a question she had wanted answered since she was a child; why hadn’t her parents returned to her? There was another question she had wanted answered since the throne room; if they had left on that ship, how had they ended up buried on Jakku? This was her chance to receive answers to both. If she had to fight him, so be it, but he wasn’t going anywhere.

He folded under her withering stare. “The truth is what I told you, Rey – what you admitted to yourself. They were nobody. They sold you for drinking money.”

Rey’s tone darkened as she sensed his fear grow. “No, that’s not enough.”

“I just saw flashes,” he insisted.” They came from off-world with you to a research facility in Tuanul that paid money for young Force-users. Your parents feared your Force powers, as my family had feared mine. They spent all their money to get you there, but the research facility didn’t want you, because you didn’t have enough darkness. They became junk traders to save up enough money to leave, but they got sucked into the Jakku lifestyle. Their scavenging pay wasn’t enough to support you and their drinking habits, so they incurred debts they could never repay. They were offered a way off that planet and forgiveness of their unpaid debts in exchange for their servitude
aboard a ship for wealthy collectors, but they couldn’t take you with them. So they sold you for more drinking money and left you to rot in that hellhole. They're buried in the Jakku desert. I wasn't lying. But how do you think they ended up buried on Jakku if you saw them flying away on that ship? It exploded before it broke atmo, and the debris was buried in the sinking fields. That's the truth.”

“A pauper's grave?” she said, glaring in disappointment. He only stared back at her with something guarded in his eyes. “Show me what happened. I want to see everything you saw, then you’ll never have to see me again.”

“No,” he said resolutely, his stare returning to the floor. He moved for the blastdoor, but she blocked his exit.

“I will follow you anywhere you try to hide in this star destroyer, and you get to explain to them what ‘the girl’ from the Resistance is doing here!” she shouted. Kylo backed away instead, like a cornered animal. When she searched the bond, all she felt was his unwavering determination. It was one of the rare times that Kylo was completely devoid of conflict.

“No, Rey!” There was something else there. This wasn’t his anger stopping him, it was fear.

“Why? I already saw the explosion. I already know what happened.” But something in the Force immediately told her she was wrong. “Ben...” He shook his head defiantly, a sharp dread overwhelming the bond. Her stomach plummeted. “What haven't you told me?”

Kylo finally worked up the nerve to drag his stare back to hers. They were pleading. “Rey, please,” he swallowed his fear, but she could see him shaking. “I won't lie to you, but I can't do this. I promised myself I would never do this. You don't want this, just let the past die!”

“What are you afraid I'll find out?” He tried not to move, but she saw the panic flicker across his eyes. This was the path he didn’t want to explore. There was something he didn’t want her to discover, and it took her one guess to figure out what that something was. “Ben, how did the ship explode?”

He shook his head again, the dread intensifying. This was what he was hiding. “Don't make me do this, Rey.”

“Was it Snoke? The First Order?”
“No,” he said, squeezing his eyes shut as if it were that easy to rid himself of her. “I don't want to hurt you. Please.”

You know the truth. There is only one reason he would hide this from you, the voice in the Force reminded her.

He was the pleading, desperate Kylo of the throne room, but she found the answer in the darkness left behind by his treachery. He said he didn’t want to hurt her, as if she mattered to him at all. He had left her, shut her out, but now he was breaking her heart beyond repair. She bit back a sob.

“It was you.”

His eyes snapped open, glistening with unshed tears. His face twisted with misery. “What...”

Her voice wavered as she forced herself to give voice to the agonizing words that had found her in the cruel clarity of the darkness. “That is why a vision of my past was so important to you; that is why you hid it from me. It all makes sense now; you killed them”

“No,” he choked. His lip quivered as he sucked in an uneven breath. “Please, no.” He was desperate, but she wouldn’t listen to his lies anymore.

“You were there. You did this to me,” she whispered, closing her eyes so she wouldn’t have to see the face of the man who murdered her parents. Exhaling a shuddering breath, she allowed the darkness in to soothe her. She knew what it did to her, but she didn’t care.

“I didn't!” he yelled in frustration. “It was an accident.” With those words, the cold darkness growing inside her ignited. Burying her pain, she reacted.

“It was you the whole time!” she screamed through tears, backing away from him in disgust. “You're the one that sentenced me to a lifetime of loneliness. You told me to ‘let the past die,’ because you didn’t want me to discover the truth! You're the one who took everything from me!”

“Rey!” He reached for her in desperation, begging her to stay. It only served to enrage her further; he had already abandoned her in every way a person could; it was too late for his regrets.
“Don’t you ever touch me again, you monster.” His hand recoiled at her words, his body jolting as if she had shot him with her blaster. He swiped at his eyes but refused to let her see any sorrow for what he had done. He wasn’t sorry he did it, only sorry she had discovered the truth. This was why he had truly shut her out – he hadn’t wanted to face what he had done to her. This was why the Force had given him the vision of her parents, why he had been so "supportive," why he had helped her friends and saved her life. He had done it all out of some belated sense of guilt, or maybe that was all contrived as well.

_I hate you for what you did to me. I will never forgive you._

The fear she sensed in him faded as something like resolve passed across his features, but he didn’t say a word. His jaw was clenched, as were his fists, but the rest of his body was otherwise impassive. His barriers were high and fortified, but she could _feel_ the heaviness of his emotions in the Force. He studied her face, as if committing it to memory. He knew he would never see her again. Still, he said nothing. The darkness devoured her anger. “Tell me the truth.”

His consuming stare rolled down to the floor. He worked his jaw for a moment, exhaling slowly before his gaze returned to hers. His eyes were wet, overflowing with emotion. She wished they looked dark and hollow or evil; it would have been easier that way. “You already know the truth; what more do you want me to say?”

There was only one word left to say to him. “Why?” Her voice cracked as the tears escaped down her cheeks.

He held her stare as he swallowed thickly. “You asked me that before – why did I do it? Why did I kill my father? Did it matter then? Does it matter now, Rey? It won’t bring any of them back.”

The intimacy of her name on his lips gutted her. She never wanted to hear him say it again. She never wanted to hear him say _anything_ again. “I hate you, Kylo Ren. You’ll pay for what you did. That’s a promise.” She turned away from him before she could see the pained expression on his face. She turned away before he could tell her what promises meant to him. She walked away, without a glance back in farewell, before she could see him collapse onto the remnants of his broken throne.
Chapter End Notes

Death

Brief description of Rey's parents' death
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Rey couldn’t sleep. She was exhausted. She should sleep, but the death of her parents replayed in her mind. All her suffering had been because of the man the Force had cruelly bonded her with. She had started to believe she cared about him and foolishly believed he cared about her in return. She had been so consumed with fighting to save him that she hadn’t seen through the deception and lies. She was bonded to a monster. The only question that tore away at her, the only question left unanswered, was why?

Why did he tell me I’m not alone when he was the one that did it? Why did he pretend he cared? Why didn’t he tell me? Why did he do it? Why does he save me when he kills everyone I love?

Because he had a selfish reason to save you... the voice hissed in her head. You felt the pain of trying to sever your connection... He is fearful that if you die, then he will as well... he believes the only chance he has of finding the Resistance is through your bond... And, he would rather have the satisfaction of killing you by his own hand... He does not care for you, foolish child... No... Kylo Ren cares for no one but himself... He has proven that... Remember, he wanted it this way...

He meant to abandon your bond, and you with it... You are nothing to him... You owe him nothing... He threw you away like garbage, as your parents did... He would still kill you... Just as he killed your parents... and Han... and Luke... and soon he will finish Finn... and Rose... and Poe... and his mother... Even if he had moments of... compassion... He will murder everyone you care for... You must protect the Resistance... Their lives have been at his disposal through this bond... You cannot trust that he will walk away with the knowledge he has... You remember Crait... You cannot put your friends in that position again... You cannot allow yourself to save him again in your weakness... It will be your own destruction... You tried to save him, but you failed... It is time to face your destiny... And for Kylo Ren to face his...

Rey breathed the darkness into her lungs, surrendering to its cold, consuming its depths in resolution. Force’s will or not, I have to kill Kylo Ren.

The Force responded to her declaration, giving her the means to stand by her words. As she lay on her back on her makeshift bed, staring at the ceiling, she sensed the familiar vibration of his energy. Dread and anticipation tumbled in her stomach.
She sensed his presence around her and inside her mind. She waited. All she could hear was the pounding of her own heartbeat in her ears. She felt vulnerable, lying helpless on her bed. Her eyes darted around the room in search of his looming shadow. Nothing. She sat up and scanned the room, her eyes landing on a dark figure beside her. She gasped and threw herself to the floor, sliding backward across the stone until she could go no further. Then she sat with her knees to her chest, holding her agitated breath, as she stared at him. Even after all the commotion, he was asleep.

*He hates you... He lied to you and betrayed you... He abandoned you because you mean nothing to him... He let you suffer alone on Jakku...*

Kylo was on his side, facing her, his head resting on his outstretched arm. His wrists were still bound in shackles, but he looked otherwise uninjured. Without consideration of the consequences, she slowly stood. She was not scared to wake the sleeping dragon. She was drawn toward him, like the gravitational pull of a planet to its sun. Every step she progressed closer to the sleeping beast, she could perceive more of his surroundings. His quarters were dark, as lacking in personalization as he lacked in empathy. When she finally came to rest next to him, time slowed as if she were in a dream. He didn't stir.

She felt the urge to touch him.

Her hand hovered over his face, and she felt soft currents flow against her palm in the Force. She pushed deeper into the currents. What had first felt calm became more erratic and tumultuous as she dove deeper. She began to sense images in the current. They were only brief flashes, but it was enough to discern what she was sensing; dreams. What she saw churned her stomach. Faces twisted in pain, screams of the dying, blood, and death... it was all death. Most of the faces she didn’t recognize, but when she saw Han’s face, she nearly ripped her hand away.

Rey wanted to *see*, however. Apart from Han, two faces appeared again and again. There was a young man, a Jedi by the look of his clothes, shivering as he died in the rain. There was another, a young red-headed woman. Her eyes were closed as he held her in his arms. There was something tender about the moment that gave her pause. The last flash was of a beautiful garden, of him smiling. It made no sense. Rey tore her hand away as his smile tore through her resolve.

*He is the cause of all your suffering... He will do it again... He will find your new family... and kill them all, just as he did to his father... You know now that you can’t save him... You must kill him... Save his mother, your friends, the Resistance, the galaxy from his wrath... Before he does what he did to your parents... Do him a favor... end his suffering... It is the only way to break the bond,* the whispers convinced her.
The fear trembled through her as a thought passed through her mind. *What would he do to me if he awoke right now?* Kylo was, if nothing else, incredibly unpredictable. *He would kill me,* she convinced herself. *If not right now, then the moment he found us. He would kill us all. I have no choice. I have to do this. For the Resistance.* The cold darkness returned, devouring her fear and anger, twisting through her... claiming her. Her attention was drawn to his lightsaber next to him. *He said it himself. The only way to end this is through death. I could end everything right now. I could end all this pain. I could sever this connection once and for all.* She called his weapon into her hands.

It felt heavy, much heavier than Luke's – but not nearly as heavy as the weight of taking a life. She triggered the weapon and admired the unstable, serrated plasma blade and the dangerous lateral vents. She hadn't had time to admire it the last time she held it. But seeing it now, she knew it was everything that Kylo was. She was surprised by the peace that settled over her as the energy of the lightsaber pulsated through her.

*It would be so easy, and poetic, to end him like this, by his own weapon. But I also know he would hate for death to take him in his sleep. He is a warrior. He would want to fight until the bitter end. But if he wanted a choice in his death, he should have done it himself.* She breathed raggedly. Willing herself to do it, terrified of what she would do if he awoke. *Come on! Do it! Do it for the Resistance! Do it for Leia.* She imagined it. She wouldn't have to witness the pain or regret in his eyes. It would be quick. It could be painless. All she had to do was access the strength to do it.

*Surrender to the darkness... Its power will give you the strength you need,* the voice whispered.

*You are nothing to him! He abandoned you, twice! He lied to you! This is the path he chose! He killed your parents! He killed his own father! He’ll kill again! He’s a monster!*

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she looked upon the man she was destined to kill. The man in front of her didn't resemble a monster. His face seemed kind and youthful, missing the storm of emotions he typically harbored while awake. Locks of his dark hair tumbled across his forehead, and she felt the increasing desire to sweep the errant strands away in a gesture not meant for her enemy. She had never seen him look so peaceful. So… normal. His broad chest was still covered in the uniform she had last observed him wearing, and she presumed he had not left his quarters at all.

She tried to suppress her own conflicted feelings for him, tried to forget the visions of a future together, tried to ignore the desperate plea to save him screaming from somewhere deep inside her soul. She knew that this final justice would be what anyone else in her position would not hesitate to do. Even with the darkness clouding her mind, however, even though he had committed the ultimate evil against her family, she didn’t *want* to kill him.

*How could I look at his dying mother tomorrow and tell her I killed her sleeping, defenseless son!*
A man that I...

Kill him now... The voice commanded ... Kill him with the cruelest stroke.

As her hand descended, another voice screamed. Rey! No!

Luke?

Rey startled at the familiarity of it, fumbling with the lightsaber and nearly dropping it on Kylo's exposed throat. She caught the weapon centimeters from his skin, the right lateral vent burning a hole in the dark pillow supporting his head. A clarity burst through the darkness that had consumed her, at once understanding the horrifying consequences of the temptations she nearly surrendered to. They were the same temptations his uncle had nearly succumbed to that ultimately contributed to Kylo’s fall.

I’m no better than you, Luke.

She moved her finger to the switch to deactivate the weapon, but found that her hand would not obey her.

A biting cold passed over her. She felt paralyzed. No, she was paralyzed. It awakened memories of the first time they had met on Takodana. She was so consumed by own fear that she did nothing to fight against it. Never threaten someone with your blade unless you are willing to use it. The deep, familiar voice of her bondmate echoed through her mind. Don't hesitate. Your hesitation or your weapon can be used again you. You should have killed me. Kylo’s burning eyes shot open. He reached out and wrapped his large hands around hers on the hilt of the lightsaber and forcefully jerked the weapon down, closer to his throat, pulling her with it.

The second he touched her hand, she gasped. A spark of energy passed between them. When she regained her awareness, she realized she had been jolted into a vision. Thousands of memories and emotions flooded past her eyes, overwhelming her senses. She realized quickly that she was seeing the world through the eyes of a little boy.
Chapter End Notes

Threat of violence

Rey nearly kills Kylo in a very familiar way

Warning! The following chapters are very dark chapters. Rey is reliving some of Kylo's darkest memories. If you're concerned about a trigger, it is likely in here. There is graphic violence, many characters deaths, physical torture, psychological torture, grooming of a young child, gaslighting, abuse, manipulation, you name it. If you have a specific trigger, it's better to play it safe and message me with concerns as there are many specific violent scenarios encountered here. Nothing written here is worth putting yourself through mental duress. I would be more than happy to piece together parts of the chapters or give a detailed overview as I understand they are important chapters.
Rey realized the Force had dragged her into a vision, and she was seeing the galaxy through the eyes of a little boy. She saw younger versions of Han and Leia. She quickly understood that this wasn't a vision, but memories. It was Kylo before he had turned. It was Ben. There were quick snippets of memories as if only fragments of the memories remained. He laughed with his father in the cockpit of the Falcon... his mother sat on his bed and lovingly tousled his hair... he giggled as he showed a room full of people a pair of golden sabaac dice... his father playfully tossed him to
his mother in a lake... he walked through a crowd on top of Chewbacca’s tall shoulders... and laughed as the Wookiee chased him through the *Falcon*... a man he referred to as "Unca Wanwo" threw him playfully into the air as he donned a long, extravagant cloak... his father patientely taught him how to shoot a blaster... his mother read to him... Rey heard his laughter, felt the bright, beaming warmth of his happiness. His light was overwhelming. It was everything she had imagined when she wondered why he had thrown it all away.

*How did that boy kill his own father... and my parents?*

It was everything she had ever dreamed of in a family. Old pangs of hunger found her from her life on Jakku. Not the hunger for food, no, this was deeper, this carried her through the darkest nights. It was the yearning for a family. When she shared in his happy memories, even for a moment, she felt as if she had found the belonging she had always been searching for. That little boy with everything he could ever want, grew up and took everything from her. She had never wanted to hate someone so much in her life.

Then the happy memories faded into a new one.

She saw the world through the eyes of the same little boy, but this memory was different. The memory was hazy and incomplete, with more images and emotions than a typical memory. Ben was sobbing, though she felt the cause was insignificant, as he couldn’t even remember why he was crying. Rey was not the best judge of a child’s age, but by the sound of his voice and the small hands covering his face, he couldn’t have been more than a couple years old. There was a tingling down the back of his neck. Rey recognized it for what it was; a warning in the Force. Ben may have been naïve to what it meant, but she felt his visceral fear.

*Run, Ben.*

Startling at the sound of his own name in his head, he spun around. He felt something inside of him guiding him to where he should fix his attention. His eyes focused on the arm of the droid, which had unfolded into a sharp blade. He didn’t know why, but he knew he should be afraid. Ben threw his hands out to protect himself when his fear exploded from inside him. A bright white light exploded from his hands, and he recoiled in terror.

His hands were shaking, soft whimpers escaping his throat as he huddled in the corner. His vision blurred as he stared up at the kitchen droid, eyes wide as he awaited his fate. The droid’s arm retracted, the serrated blade disappearing inside the mechanism. The droid began chattering about returning to the kitchen and fixing the young Ben caf.
Though Rey realized that the danger had passed, Ben did not. He stayed shaking in the corner, knowing instinctively the droid had intended to hurt him, but not why. Rey knew he didn’t understand what had happened. The only thing he knew was that he was afraid and there was no one there to comfort him. He was alone. Biting his lip until he drew blood, both hands over his mouth, he tried not to cry in fear that the droid would come back.

*It’s okay, Ben; you’re safe now.*

The memory faded with his muffled whimpers, and a new memory emerged. His hand was outstretched toward the heavens, screaming, as the *Millennium Falcon* rocketed out of the atmosphere. She shuddered as it mirrored that fateful day from her own childhood. *The day he took them from me.* Ben fell to his knees and cried. He pulled the pair of golden dice from his pocket, letting the light catch them as he dangled them between his fingers, then grasped onto them in a trembling fist. “Don't go!” Rey could feel his longing for his family. His thoughts centered on his father's broken promise that this time he would take Ben with him. He wondered what he had done wrong, why he had been left behind again. His torment radiated through the bond. She knew that loneliness all too well. “I wanna go too!”

A familiar voice whispered in his mind. *He doesn’t love you, boy...*

It was the whisper she had heard from the Force.

How was she was hearing the same voice that Ben had heard as a child? Did every Force-sensitive hear the same voice, or was it another connection between them?

An inexplicable dread twisted in her stomach.

*No one loves you...You are a burden to them...You have darkness in you...You'll never be good enough for them... You’re not worthy of their love...They hate you...They will always hate you...They hate what makes you truly unique...*

Ben began to hyperventilate, wondering if the voices were right, if that was why he was left alone. His fear, loneliness, and anger began spiraling into the Force. Rey listened to him convince himself that he *was* good, he *was* loved, that they *did* want him. She couldn’t understand why the voice was saying such cruel things to him. She knew Leia and Han loved him, why would the Force say such lies to a child? With every word the voice whispered in his head, her anger with him faded to the background.
Let’s be secret friends... Can you keep our secret... Think of what they will do if you tell them you’re hearing voices in your head... You see the way they look at you... They will send you away... You will never be good enough for them... You are nothing to them... But I can see how truly special you are... Only the comfort and power of the darkness will ever be there for you... Yes... I can feel it flowing through you now... Let it in... It has always been a part of you... It will give you strength... Power... It will make this pain go away... She could feel his emotions escalating beyond control.

“No!” he screamed, his intense emotions expelled in a wave of Force that leveled the surrounding shrubbery and stone sculptures, creating destruction in its wake. He tumbled backward and stared at his own shaking hands in fear. An older woman stomped outside and grabbed his arm, yanking him off the ground.

“I...I...” he stuttered, his voice small and impossibly young. He was confused; he couldn't understand what had happened. “Ow, let go!”

“Ben, get inside,” the woman demanded through clenched teeth, dragging him, as he fought to twist his arm away from her.

“No, I need 'em!” He reached for the chance cubes that had landed somewhere amongst the debris in the aftermath of his emotional explosion.

Rey could feel the tumultuous emotions building uncontrollably inside him again. “They’re just dice!” she snapped, dragging him farther away as he resisted her.

“No!” This time the release of his emotions formed a wave of Force that crashed against the older woman as he pulled away. He fell forward onto the ground, searching the debris for the object he so desperately desired. He moved his trembling hands hysterically through the brush as he blinked through tears. His fingers uncovered a sliver of gold in the dust. He was able to wrap his hand around it before he was yanked backward.

“You little monster!” the woman growled as she dragged him through the dirt. “You tried to kill me!”

Ben sobbed an incoherent apology. Rey knew he hadn't meant to hurt the woman, but he believed he had done something wrong; thoughts about being “bad” were swirling through his head. You’re not bad, she wanted to assure the boy, forgetting for a moment what he had become, but the chastening ire in the woman's eyes confirmed Ben's suspicions. He ripped his arm from the
woman's grasp, but she thwarted his escape by catching him by the ear.

“Look at these ears! You're lucky you were practically born into royalty because no one would want an ugly, useless, disobedient little monster like you. You are nobody without your family, Ben, and how much longer until they can see what the rest of us see? No one knows what to do with you.” The woman yanked him to her side and walked back to the house with him in tow, ignoring his yelps in pain and protest. “I quit, you destructive little brat. Are you happy now? I’m taking you to your mother. She is very busy at the Senate, trying to solve real problems in this galaxy, and she will be very disappointed that you’re causing problems again! They will bring the droids back to care for you; is that what you want? Why can’t you be the good little boy that the heroes of the rebellion deserve?”

The vision faded with his sobs.

Why did the Force show me that?

Another memory appeared. He was hiding in the refresher with his hands clamped over his ears. He was crying on the ground as he stared at himself in a long floor mirror. Rey knew that boy. Where had she seen him before? Those eyes... The hallway! He was the boy from the hallway in her vision on Takodana. Why did I see a vision back then of Ben as a little boy? His eyes looked nothing like that of her bondmate, yet those hopeful orbs contained all the intensity of his venerable gaze. He was not much older than she was when her parents abandoned her; he looked... full of life. Haunted, but unbroken. Struggling, but not yet lost. Lonely, but not yet burdened by the atrocities he would one day commit.

She heard a man and a woman fighting through the door, and she knew immediately that they were quarreling about Ben. His inner dialogue told her that these arguments were a regular occurrence.

How often did Ben overhear what they said about him?

“I don’t know! He won't talk to me about it!” the woman cried.

“Well, he better start! He nearly killed that boy!”

“He’s just a child, Han,” her tone was less angry than defensive. “He just lost control. The Force is stronger in him than he knows. He didn’t mean to hurt that boy!”
“Holy mother of meteors, he didn't mean to hurt him? He threw him against a tree with his mind!” Han shouted in frustration. “He's getting worse. Everyone sees it, Leia. If you spent any time with him, you'd see it too.”

“That’s not fair. This is about more than our family. I cannot sit idle and watch the New Republic descend into chaos and instability!” It was an unexpected realization that Leia’s impassioned claims about “chaos and instability” reminded her of her bondmate. Yes, he was her son, but he was the Supreme Leader. Rey had assumed he had learned his political beliefs from the First Order. What if it wasn’t that simple? “I am trying to prevent the rise of another Empire! I’m trying to prevent the destruction of another Alderaan!”

“What about preventing another Darth V...”

“Don’t you dare say that name in this house!” There was a loud crash as something breakable hit a wall somewhere beyond the refresher door. “Just because he is strong in the Force...”

“Strong?” Han scoffed, “Luke is strong in the Force. But this is something else. Nobody’s seen anything like this before. Now I ain't got no special powers, but I can tell you there's darkness in that kid. He’s too emotional. He destroys everything. You should see how they look at him! They treat him like a sideshow for some galactic circus. Nobody wants to be around him, he's too... different! I don’t know what to do with him; I'm not cut out for this! He needs his mother!”

“He needs his father! Do you not see the way he begs for your attention? He tries desperately to impress you! I’ve seen the way you look at him! He’s your son! How do you know what he needs when you are gone for weeks at a time at your races?”

“I’ve tried,” Han sighed. “We’ve got nothing in common. He’d rather watch your political meetings, do his Force mumbo jumbo and write with ink all day. He's a fine pilot, but he's too young for the races.”

Leia hummed. “And those occasional smuggling runs you think I don't know about?”

“I...” Han started defensively, as if he was preparing a lie, but thought better of it. “He has no interest in smuggling runs. He argues with me about the effects of spice on the galaxy. What am I supposed to do with that? And then there's his temper. He screams at no one and puts holes in my ship with his Force tantrums. He bends durasteel with his mind. That kid ain't cut out for space travel. And the more I try, the worse he becomes! Nothing I do will change him. He’s too much like his grandfather.”
Leia’s voice was quiet, but every word was still audible through the door “I don’t know what to do with him anymore.”

The edge of anger in Han’s voice had been replaced by something else. Fear? “I don’t know what to do with him, either, but we’ve got to do something, I won’t lose him to the dark side, too!”

“He’s not evil, Han. He’s a child! Our child! The Sith are dead. As long as we strengthen the New Republic…”

She could hear the argument continue into another room as Han clearly tried to escape the argument. “Enough with the New Republic!”

“Enough with your obsession with the dark side! Just because she…”

“My obsession? Damp down your power core, princess. This isn't about Qu’... this isn't about her,” his voice was sharp with warning. “This is about your father. You think this is easy for me? You don’t know what it’s like to lose someone to the dark side!”

“That’s not fair,” she snarled. “I’ve lost enough to the dark side.” It was quiet for a moment, and Rey thought the argument had ended with that vulnerable statement, but then she continued. “I lost people too. Some even died in my arms.”

“Yeah, I bet you wish Kier was here instead of me. Then you could have a different husband and a different son. He apparently looks enough like him, though. That’s why you keep Ben's hair longer, isn't it? Maybe you just wish you never met me. Better politician, better husband, better father – too bad he’s dead and I’m here, huh? He would probably bend to your every whim and –”

“That’s enough, Han!” But the damage was done. Rey could sense Ben wondering if his mother wished she had another family – one without the man she always fought with, and without a son who was a burden.

“You’re the one still holding onto a dead man’s lock of hair!” Based upon the gasp, Leia was unaware Han knew about her secret. “Yeah, don’t look so surprised, Princess. I found it in a box in your drawer with everything else you refuse to deal with.” Han paused for a moment, and when he continued, his tone was not as cutting. “You're stuck in your past and obsessed with the future of the galaxy. Where does that leave me and your son?”
“I am not obsessed with my past,” she said. Though Leia believed it, Rey wasn’t certain anyone else did. “And as for the future, you cannot expect me to stand by and watch the New Republic fail.”

Han huffed loudly. “When it comes to this family and the Senate, someone will lose, and it ain’t gonna be me.”

“The New Republic needs my help.”

“Fine by me, sweetheart. Go fix the New Republic!” he said flippantly. “Who cares about the struggle of one screwed-up kid if you save the galaxy, right?”

“I can't change the darkness Ben struggles with,” she said quietly, but not quietly enough. “We should have been more careful. I should never have brought a child into this galaxy with a bloodline like mine.”

Ben shuddered. Rey wasn't certain if it was from the impact of his mother's words or the sound of his father's voice booming through the house. “It's a little too late for that, isn't it?”

“Where are you going?” Leia's tone was tight and strained as if she were forcing away emotions she refused to feel. Rey recognized it from arguments with the woman's son.

“What do you care?” The sound of shuffling and zippers were apparently well known to Ben. He knew what it meant. His father was abandoning him for the stars. Again. “I'm leaving early to train for the championship race. I'll be back in a few weeks. Trust me, your highness; you won't even notice I'm gone.”

“Stop calling me that,” the fight was gone from her voice. “And don't leave without saying goodbye to your son, but spare him the promise of a holocall. He doesn't deserve to bear your excuses anymore.”

“Sure thing, your worship,” he replied derisively, the smirk most certainly on his lips evident in his voice.
Ben shook uncontrollably, covering his ears. Blood dripped from his quivering fingers as his nails dug into the side of his head. The objects on the counters and shelves levitated off the surfaces as the anxiety intensified inside of him. Rey's chest ached as she felt Ben's anguish. She never had a family to compare it to, but as his thoughts centered on the burden he had become to them, she wondered if maybe he hadn't had the happy family she had imagined.

Judging by Ben's demeanor, it was an argument worse than he had ever experienced before, but perhaps that had made it memorable enough for her to experience. She reminded herself that, if this was the worst, then his happy memories still far outnumbered the bad. Though their words were upsetting, she knew they loved each other… and their son. Young Ben knew that, he had to know that, because at least he had parents. And not just any parents, but heroes of the rebellion. Even if her parents were dirty junk traders, she would have given anything to have memories of them fighting. He took that from her. The voices outside the door faded as the whispers began again.

Listen to them... They wish they never had a son... They don’t want you… They don’t love you... No one could ever love you...They all hate you...You can see it in their eyes...You are a burden...A monster to be feared...You mean nothing to them...That boy deserved worse than to be thrown into that tree for what he said... He deserved to die, not break a few bones...You were merciful… But they don’t see it… Your mother is too busy with her precious Republic...Your father loves his ship more than you... They don't care...They want you gone... And if you tell them about me, they’ll have their excuse to get rid of you... Do you want them to make you go away...They would be happier without you... But they don’t see what I see…I can help you...I see how special your power is...You can be better if you just let the darkness in... This pain can finally go away... It's your destiny...

“Get out of my head!” the young Ben screamed. The objects dropped from mid-air and shattered into pieces on the floor around him. Rey heard two voices calling out for him from beyond the door, two sets of heavy footsteps quickly approaching, two pairs of fists pounding on the Force-jammed door, hysterically begging him to talk to them. The emotions of their fight immediately disappeared, the love in their voices evident as they called to their son. His mother started singing to him, and his father's frightened voice announced that he was going to find his tools.

Ben stared with burning eyes into the mirror, hyperventilating as he rocked on his knees and ripped out his hair. Ben was hypersensitive to their emotions vibrating in the Force. He felt their anger and desperation as if it were his own, and now their escalating fear. Their thoughts were loud, drowning his own thoughts. It was overstimulating and overwhelming. She felt his emotions reaching a crescendo that could only spiral out of control again. She braced herself for another Force wave of destruction. Instead, he propelled his fist into the mirror, exploding his reflection into tiny fragments.

The physical release quieted the dangerous intensity of the Force swelling inside him. A broken mirror was still destruction, but it paled in comparison to the uncontrolled destruction the Force could create. He sighed, studying the blood dripping from his knuckles onto the shattered pieces on
the floor. She sensed his relief at his newfound outlet, the physical pain far more preferable to the suffocating emotions.

The memory left her insides feeling slimy and uncomfortable. Her questions only grew after each interaction, as did her desire to know why the Force wanted her to see it. Where would it end? When he killed her parents? The memory faded into another.

Ben was sitting with his legs crossed, his back against a wall. He was perhaps a year or two older than the previous memory, but his voice still held the gentleness of a young boy. He hummed a song softly to himself in a quiet corridor. The tune sounded eerily familiar, then he began to sing:

“Mirrorbright, shines the moon,
its glow as soft as an ember
When the moon is mirrorbright,
take this time to remember
Those you have loved but are gone
Those who kept you so safe and warm
The mirrorbright moon lets you see
Those who have ceased to be
Mirrorbright shines the moon,
as fires die to their embers
Those you love are with you still-
The moon will help you remember.”

It was a lullaby. The one she remembered from her childhood – the one Leia had asked her about when they first arrived on Barkhesh. *How did Ben know that lullaby?* He continued to hum the song, mindlessly rolling Han's chance cubes on the floor by his feet. There was a pervasive loneliness that fluttered in the periphery of his consciousness, a dull ache that Rey recognized all too well.

*Where are Han and Leia? A droid? Anyone?*

She could sense the anger and resentment in him, even then; and there was darkness, too, but inside
that darkness was a light that was stronger than she had imagined, yet somehow... familiar.

His small, youthful hands released the dice again, practicing with a flick of his wrist to roll them to his will. Rey noticed that he manipulated the Force with unpredictable variation; his control was nearly non-existent.

He repeated the process over and over again, becoming more frustrated with every endeavor, observing each outcome with the attentiveness of a disciplined student. He was dedicatedly distracted by his simple game, and he did not notice the individual standing before him until the golden cubes deflected off a shiny black shoe. As he reached for his father's dice, deformed fingers wrapped tenderly around his hand. His eyes flickered up to the individual who was kneeling uncomfortably close to him. He startled when he looked upon the strange creature's twisted face. Rey's stomach dropped at the sight.

“Ah, young Ben Solo,” Snoke said, smiling unnaturally. Even young Ben sensed a wickedness behind the display. Rey cringed. A strong protectiveness tightened in her throat. She had no idea Snoke had been in her bondmate's life for that long.

“H...hello, sir,” he squeaked. Rey could feel the fear in Ben that Snoke undoubtedly sensed as well. His thoughts made it clear that Ben was uncertain what exactly unsettled him about the energy that surrounded the creature, but he felt the fierce instinct to run. He glanced over the humanoid's shoulder, attempting to meet the eyes of a Mon Calamari walking past, all at once terrified of being left alone with this monster of nightmares. Snoke moved into his line of sight before the amphibian could notice his silent plea.

“Do you know who I am?” He smiled again, and nausea rolled through Ben's stomach. Fear prickled the back of his neck, the small hairs standing on end.

“Do you work with my mother?” Ben guessed. “I’m waiting for her. She should be along any minute to collect me.” His speech struck Rey as overly formal for a boy so young. She supposed his education had resulted in the pedantic and pretentious speech she knew so well, rather than his high rank in the First Order, as she had originally assumed.

Ben tried to be brave, lifting his chin in the face of pure evil, but his hands trembled and his voice faltered. Rey sensed his revulsion toward the creature – every cell in his body vibrated with distrust. After witnessing this interaction, if she had not known the eventual outcome, she would have had no trouble believing that one day Ben would grow up to kill Snoke. She would have imagined a heroic Jedi who stood strong in the face of evil, as he had done as a child. Had someone told her he would willingly serve the creature as an apprentice, she never would have believed it.
“Lies...” The creature tutted, running his fingers through Ben's hair, before tenderly caressing his cheek. Ben was too terrified to move, but Rey was livid. *Don't you touch him, you sick monster!* The young boy looked away, anywhere but in the creature's predatory eyes. “You know your mother is too busy for that, Ben. She is working; she won't come to you for hours. Because she wishes she had a different son. A better son. She doesn't love you. No one loves you. She will abandon you. You will be alone, just like this, every single day. But you don't have to be. With my help, I see you becoming more than a burden to be cast aside like garbage. I see you becoming the greatest of all Jedi. Even more powerful than Luke Skywalker. You are special, more than you know. Let the darkness in, feel its power.” Ben inhaled sharply, meeting the creature's stare as he recognized those words.

“It's you,” Ben realized. “The voice from my head. You're real...” The boy was shaking uncontrollably, tears blurring his vision.

*No.*

Rey whispered, her own realization sinking in her stomach. That voice... it wasn’t the voice of the Force. Just as she had always known deep down the truth about the identity of her parents, the realization of who had been whispering in her mind was only confirmation of a truth she had been denying herself. She had chosen to be blind to it. It didn’t *sound* like Snoke, but the truth was right there in the Force for her to find. *It was* that creature’s voice in her head, convincing her to alienate and murder his once apprentice – the man with whom he had bonded her.

*Snoke is manipulating me just as he did Ben. What would have happened if I listened to him...*

“Yes, I am the voice in your head. You should be grateful. I was the one who helped you escape that kitchen droid. Say ‘thank you.’” Ben didn’t think the two voices sounded the same, but he considered the consequences if he argued.

Ben shivered in a new wave of fear. “Thank you, sir.”

“But it has to be our little secret, child,” Snoke warned, “or they will find out and send you away.” Ben nodded obediently, the tears finally spilling down his cheek.

*Mama, where are you?*
He began to snuffle.

“Shh...” Snoke rasped, slowly wiping a tear that had fallen on the boy's lips with a gnarled finger. “Tears are for weak little boys. You are not weak, are you? No more tears or they'll ask questions. If you tell them, I'll have to hurt them. You wouldn't want that, would you? I'll know if you tell them; I'm in your head, remember? I can hear your thoughts, every... single... one, even the very naughty ones, boy. You can't keep any secrets from me, but you will keep our secret, won't you?”

“Y...yes, sir,” Ben said, pivoting out of the creature's grasp to wipe his tears.

*Please. I want to go home.*

“Call me master.” Snoke smiled again, a knowing, predatory baring of yellowed teeth.

“Yes, master,” Ben whimpered, wrapping his arms around himself. Rey wanted nothing more than to hold the young Ben and assure him that he would okay.

*But that would be a lie, wouldn't it? Because he won't be okay. That monster will get his prize.*

This was merely a memory, she had to remind herself. Ben had already fallen, tempted to the dark side by Snoke years before. But she wanted to fight for that boy, to save him, and she felt hopeless knowing that she couldn't.

*Why did the Force bring me to him now? Why not then?*

Sensing Ben's fear of him, he tried a different tactic. “Do you like stories?” Ben nodded hesitantly. Snoke patted his knee and offered his revolting hand to the boy. “Come sit, and I'll tell you a story.” Rey’s stomach churned as Ben obeyed.

“There once was a fire in the jungles of Dagobah, and the creatures were trying to escape across a river. The Porcuspine asked the Aquatic Gundark for a ride to the other side, as he could not swim. At first, the Gundark refused, because he knew the Porcuspine was poisonous. ‘You will sting me,’ he said. The Porcuspine assured him he wouldn’t. ‘If I sting you, then we both will drown.’ Accepting his logic, the kind Gundark decided to help him. The Porcuspine climbed onto the Gundark's back, and they made their way into the river. Halfway across, the Porcuspine stung the Gundark. The poison set in quickly. As the Gundark began to sink under the water he cried, ‘Why would you do that? Now we’ll both die!’ to which the Porcuspine replied, ‘I’m sorry; it is my nature.’”
In his innocence, Ben was more horrified that the creatures died than the dark moral of the story.
“I… I don’t understand.”

“You will, young Skywalker,” Snoke promised. “You will.”

Rey found it difficult to hate him when all she wanted to do was save him from the fate he had already suffered.

_I had no idea. Ben, why didn’t you tell me?_

Had she ever given him the chance?

The memory faded into another.

He was still young, sitting alone at a table, his chin resting on his folded arms. A fluffy, bread-like food with a creamy, brown spread was presented in front of him. There was a collection of lit candles in a circle on top. Rey had never seen anything like it.

“A joyful date of birth, young Master Ben,” A T-2LC protocol droid said.

_Date of birth... Birthday? That's right, I remember, those are important to families. I don't even know when my birthday is, Rey thought._

She knew of birthdays from her time on Jakku, had heard the off-worlders speak of its celebration and traditions. Rey didn't know much about them, but she did know they were supposed to be happy occasions surrounded by family. This one seemed to contain neither criteria. She could sense Ben's resentment of the candlelit food, a boiling itch under his skin to smash it to bits.

“Thank you, Elsie,” Ben said softly. “Did mother or father call yet?”

_Or Uncle Chewie or Uncle Lando? he thought miserably. At least they made it to my birthday last year, and they don't even live in the same system as us._
“Not yet, but your mother had your favorite cake flown in from the finest shop in Coruscant.” The masculine programmed droid answered.

Favorite? I don’t even like chocolate... She could sense the bitter edge to his words even through his thoughts, but Ben didn’t seem particularly surprised that he was celebrating his birthday alone.

“And your father bought you the newest flight simulator on the market as your birthday gift, sir. All the other younglings will surely be envious.” Rey was envious. Having only an ancient starfighter to run flight simulations on, she was itching to try his new gift. Not that anyone had gifted her anything – before Han Solo gifted her a blaster, ironically enough – but if they had given her such a thoughtful present, it would have meant everything to her. But Ben seemed to... resent the gift. It left a sour taste in her mouth, how unappreciative he had been of something she would have loved. The small number of possessions she owned had been important to her because she never had anything. He could have anything he wanted, yet it all meant nothing to him.

What more could he ask for?

As if in response, young Ben's voice whispered in her head. I don't want another machine to teach me; I don't want any more presents – I just want him.

She realized then how profoundly simple it was to misunderstand another person. It was difficult to see the galaxy around her without the jaded lens of her upbringing. Maybe Ben didn’t see the galaxy as she did. Maybe the point of showing her his memories was to help her understand how he saw the galaxy. Maybe that would explain why he could have done the unforgivable. She had begged the Force for an answer; maybe this was it.

Underneath the simmering anger, Rey could sense appreciation in him. Toward the protocol droid, she realized. Ben was grateful to receive no sympathy, apologies, lies, or excuses from the droid, though he recognized they were not capable of such human emotions or pretenses anyway.

I like droids, he thought. They never leave me or forget me or make me cry. They never look at me like I’m bad. They say what they think.

As a man who pushed everyone else away, his relationship with the droid called “Blue” began to make more sense to her. She had wondered how a man who would not think twice before taking a life, could be so gentle with a heap of parts and sensors. He had been raised by droids. The kitchen droid had nearly killed him, but no droid had ever hurt him the only way her bondmate feared to be
Ben watched the fire flicker above the candles, making no other effort toward conversation. There was an ache in his chest that Rey knew well, though she never imagined that Ben had ever experienced feeling unwanted as a child. It wasn't true, obviously. He had a family, of course he was wanted. Rey knew Han and Leia had wanted and loved him very much. Ben knew that too. He had to know.

His thoughts suggested he didn’t; they focused on what he had done wrong this time. Was it his fight with the two sons of the neighbor? Or the incident at the dinner party? Was it his screams from those nightmares that awoke his parents at night? Was it the holoprojector he broke in anger at his father? The third shattered mirror this week? Or perhaps when he "rudely" told his Uncle Luke that he never wanted to become a Jedi over that holocall? Ben tried to pinpoint exactly what he had done for them to reject him this time, enough to not bother coming home for his birthday. Again. Snoke’s lies replayed over in his head, and Rey realized that, though he denied them to the monster, he believed them.

The fire danced as the candles burned. Ben wondered: if his anger had taken the form of fire, would he look like the melting candle on the inside? What happens when my candle is all burned up? The darkness found him then, soothing him, and he could find no reason or will to fight against it. Rey knew how easy it was to let it in and how impossible it was to cast it out again. Ben perked up slightly as the darkness numbed him. He enjoyed watching the wax roll down onto the food. The darkness was pleased with the beautiful destruction created by the fire. “I believe the proper protocol is to blow out the candles, Master Ben.”

He hadn't moved from resting his head on his arms, clearly having no intention of participating in his own birthday ritual. “Where is Beex? He should be here at least.” Ben's voice was heavy with anger and exhaustion, his thoughts consumed with loneliness. It was a snippet of the man her future bondmate would become. 

“Master Ben,” Elsie chided. “He is a culinary droid; his place is in the kitchen. And you know what happened the last time he oversaw charge of you. The masters would have my power core if you were in the same room again. He nearly killed you.”

“I won't be alone with him. And I won't run around the house with a power drill this time,” Ben suggested with feigned levity.

Why would they care anyway? Ben thought sullenly. Without me, they would never fight, because they could have the kid they always wanted.
His thoughts focused on the "perfect family" for Han and Leia. Perhaps a son and daughter – maybe twins; they ran in the family, after all. With any hope, they would be born without the Force. Han could have the co-pilot son for his smuggling runs and races in the Falcon, and Leia could have a daughter to braid her hair, adorn in fancy dresses, and teach how to be the perfect politician.

Droids could not sense darkness, but there must have been something about the expression on Ben's face that inspired the protocol unit to change his mind. “I suppose BX-778 could break away from his duties to celebrate. Excuse me for just a moment, sir.”

“Elsie?” Ben stared up from the cake to the pivoting droid. His eyelashes were wet as they fluttered against his cheek. “You're my best friend.”

Rey’s heart clenched. She had never been good with people, but she had forgotten – or willfully ignored – how they had found each other in mutual loneliness. Perhaps he truly had been lonely long before he left his family.

“I am but a protocol droid, sir.” The T-2LC unit turned without hesitation and left Ben in the room alone. His attention returned to the small flickering flames. He thought about what wish he would make when he blew out the candles after the droids returned. The anger resurfaced, his control over the darkness melting like the candles before him. He was alone on his birthday. He didn't want the fancy cake or expensive presents. His only wish was for his family.

*Remember, Ben... I can make all your wishes and desires come true... I can bring your family to you on your birthday... All you have to do is trust me... If you trust me, I will show you everything you have ever wanted... Not expensive gifts; material possessions make you weak... As does sentiment, so dry those tears... I can provide you worth and a destiny, if you give me your loyalty... Trust your master... If they won't come for candles... They will for the flames... Set fire to the house... Burn it all... I promise, they will come... Show them they can't leave you alone without suffering the consequences...*

Ben stared at the flames that were slowly dwindling. The longer he considered listening to the voice, the darker the shadows were cast over his thoughts until he couldn't think of a reason not to obey. He plucked each candle from its place on the cake, dropping them on the expensive-looking fabric of the chairs surrounding the table. It was the first time in his memories that Rey had felt an intense darkness in him. He stood back against the wall, watching the flames grow higher. The heat intensified as bright orange scorched the chairs and licked across the expanse of the table. With his hand out in front of him, he directed the limited command he had over the Force to spread and fan the flames. The concentration of energy ignited the room in seconds. The smoke irritated his lungs, and he coughed instinctively, but he didn't leave the room. The pain made him feel more alive than he had felt in years.
"Burn," he thought. There was a vengeful satisfaction that shivered through his body. *I did this.*

Perhaps he *was* good at something, he realized. All he ever did was destroy, but this was beautiful. What if he stopped trying to hide who he was? He was finally in control of something. He couldn't make his parents stay, he couldn't make them love him, but he wasn't as powerless as he had believed. He had choices; he could control one aspect of his life. He had listened to the darkness and created something with his own strength in the Force. All this destruction was by his hands and his hands alone. He doubted he would find belonging in his family, as the outcast that everyone wanted to change, but he could forge his own destiny without them. He didn't need anyone but himself to create beautiful destruction. Ben laughed darkly, and a chill shuddered through Rey.

"Try to forget me now."

The memory faded into another, but it quickly became clear that this memory took place on the same day as the last. Ben was covered in soot and ash, reticent as he sat on the back of a police speeder. He was staring daggers at the ground, his thoughts swirling around a harsh chastisement he had apparently received from a police officer.

Rey had never seen the police in action as a child – Jakku had no police department, no governing body whatsoever – but Ben seemed well acquainted with law enforcement. For a man who despised anarchists and disorder, she had always assumed he had never broken a law until he joined an organization that believed it was above it. She shouldn’t have been surprised, she supposed, considering how inconsequentially he regarded murder. She wondered how often he had crossed paths with police as a child. She felt his longing to be good, to be the worthy son his legendary family, the officers, the galaxy expected him to be.

*What's wrong with me?* the question repeated in her head as it did his. *Why can't I be me and be good?*

“It's the Organa-Solo kid again,” one officer, a tall blue Pantorian or Chiss, grumbled. Rey wasn’t close enough to see the officers’ eyes to discern which species. The two conversing officers stood far enough away that the average human wouldn’t have heard them, but Ben – and Rey, by association – was Force-sensitive.

“There's somethin' not right about that one,” the other shorter, more round, reptilian officer – most likely a Trandoshan – responded in his best Galactic Basic with a cigarra in his mouth. “Normal kid runs screamin' from a fire, but the firefighter droid found him in the room with the fire, laughin' like a rabid Kowakian monkey-lizard. Then the kid attacks the droid like a mynock on a power couplin' when they tried to drag him out. He said he set the fire himself – used candles from a cake to do it. Kid's got a couple of bolts loose if you ask me.”
“No, he must have wanted a Jogan fruit cake instead of whatever they gave him, so he set a fire as revenge for their 'oversight.' Spoiled little rich brat is what he is.” Both officers laughed, and Ben took every word they said to heart. His parents wouldn't tell him what was wrong with him, a thought that plagued his waking thoughts, so he searched for the answer from anyone who would tell him.

The Trandoshan took a sip of caf. “You're tellin' me. As the son of a senator and general, that kid has everythin' he could've ever wanted, but he acts out like he’s the victim. He's got no idea what it's like to struggle in this galaxy. He's rich, he's human, lives on a core world, in a nice place, Force adept, with famous parents... he's got royalty in his blood; he has no right to shame them like this. He’s got no reason not to be appreciatin' the opportunities he has over the rest of us, ungrateful little delinquent. What's the over-under that he's locked up in the next ten years?”

“But his parents are always there to bail him out.” The light reflected off the tall officer's yellow eyes – a Pantorian, Rey realized – as he smashed the cigarra under his boot. “I had to take a report last week after he caused a disturbance at a high-profile benefit dinner party he attended with Senator Organa. Poor woman, she looked mortified. He lashed out at one of the attendants for no reason, slashed his face clean open, and stole a speeder. Kid’s got one thing going for him – he's a helluva pilot – too bad he wastes that talent with his evil. Of course, the victim refused to press charges on the brat for Senator Organa's sake. His only request was that the kid be forced to meet with him to apologize. Maybe the kid will learn something from him.” Rey was confused. Had she missed something? Why was she shown some memories, but not others that seemed equally or more important? Wouldn't slashing open someone's face be a more important insight to Ben than anything she had seen so far? Why hadn't she been shown something so significant? Was Ben choosing these memories? Was the Force?

*What is the point of all of this, if not to show me everything? I want to understand!*

“Either way, what a disappointment that two of the greatest war heroes of the Republic ended up with that little monster. Heard when he was born, Senator Organa fought for three days to birth him. Nearly killed her, he did, and he came out with all his teeth and that mop of hair as black as the dark side. I reckon he was born causin' trouble and never stopped. Heard they won't be havin' any more because of him. Such a waste, if you ask me. I wish I could've had parents like them, I'd never have a thing to worry about.” The Trandoshan's words confirmed everything that Ben had feared. He was bad. His parents would be better off without him. Everyone knew it, but he had been too foolish to see what Snoke had been telling him all along.

“After all they did for the galaxy, they deserve better than this. The droid should've left the kid in the house and let it burn – solve their problems for them,” the Pantorian added.
The anger Rey felt originally at hearing what horrible things they had to say about Ben faded as she realized that wasn't the worst part of what those officers had done. Ben heard every word, but he wasn't angry, he wasn't on the verge of lashing out at their hasty judgment and blind misconceptions. He believed them. Every word was more confirmation of his own insecurities. They gave weight to the voices in his head that told him he would never be good enough. And Rey could only watch as the words twisted into darkness in his heart, helpless to change any of it.

They want me... to die? No, no it's not true. They wish I wasn't... me, but they don't want me dead. They love me. Don't they? I'll be better. I'll make them want me.

Rey wondered if fate had been kinder – if she had been born a decade prior, if she had left Jakku with her parents, if her Force-sensitivity had been found earlier, perhaps they would have found each other sooner. Perhaps they could have found belonging in each other. Perhaps he would have never listened to Snoke, because she would have ensured he was never alone. She imagined herself sitting on the speeder next to him, holding his hand in comfort, telling him how much he meant to her. If she had learned anything from that moment when the blade hovered precariously over his exposed throat, it was how profoundly his loss would have affected her. She believed somewhere deep down, his uncle had felt the same. He may have killed her parents – something she could never forgive him for – but watching his memories unfold made her wish she had the ability to change them.

Ben hadn't always been a man hellbent on mass murder and galactic domination. Everything in her heart told her if only one person had understood him, if one person had been able to reach out to that boy before Snoke twisted his talons in, then Ben Solo would not have fallen. She couldn’t blame them; she wasn’t any better. But she could have been if she had been there.

A commotion behind him drew their attention. Han Solo. There was a flash of hope in Ben as his father arrived. But his stomach fell at one glimpse of his father's furious expression.

“Ben!” Han shouted.

Ben scrambled down from the speeder, falling to the ground in his haste. Ben choked on the dust cloud that was displaced in his fall. “Ben!”

Fear flooded through him at the rage in his father's voice. He had only wanted them home; he hadn't thought of the reaction they would have once they got there. Impulsively, he jumped off the ground and started running. Han only had to take a few strides forward before he caught him by the arm, not roughly, just enough to prevent his escape. As Ben struggled, Han spun him around, grasping his shoulders to force his son to look at him.

Rey could see the anger in Han's eyes, but also fear; fear for his son's safety. It was clear in his
eyes how much he loved Ben and how terrified he had become at the thought of losing his son, but his features were hardened, and Ben only saw his fury. It was apparent to her that he was trying to hold himself together, project the tough, emotionless exterior of the galactic smuggler. She wondered what would have happened if he had allowed himself to fall apart in front of his son. Perhaps Ben would have thought the heaviness of his breath or the quivering in his father's arms was something other than anger. Han could have said a million words in that moment; Rey winced at the ones he chose. “What in the eight Hells is wrong with you!”

Ben dropped his head and refused to look at his father, which only served to make Han more agitated. “Look at me!” He shook Ben, with his hands firmly grasping the boy's shoulders, as if he could shake some sense into him. “Why, Ben! Why!”

His breath smelled like alcohol as he breathed heavily in his son's face, but Ben had no fear that the man would hurt him. Rey was thankful for that; until Luke, she never realized how disillusioned she would feel when her heroes did not turn out to be the people she thought they were. If Han had hurt Ben, she didn't know if she could have ever had forgiven him, even in death. How could she have helped her bondmate forgive him if she couldn't? Han was... Han... but he still had his heart in the right place.

“Answer me!”

Rey could feel Ben withdraw in upon himself, sobbing as he shut his eyes to his father's anger. He shook his head obstinately, fighting the urge to flee. “What am I supposed to do with you? Tell me what to do!” Han continued, his voice strained.

“Just this week you've blown a hole in the wall with your Force nonsense! You woke up your mother every night with your tantrums, and you know she has a job to do! If her highness doesn't sleep, we all don't sleep! Give us a break, kid! You've shown up at your mother's work twice when you were supposed to be with your tutor! Those meetings are important, we've told you that you can't show up like that every time you hear a voice in your head. Luke told you it's just whispers in the Force; you gotta stop this. Now you set fire to the house! Oh, and how could I forget, cut a man's face and stole a speeder! Blast it all, Ben, you're lucky I already flipped the Falcon around when I heard about what you did at the dinner party. And you're lucky you weren't locked up! It ain't fun, trust me! Is that what you want, 'cause that's where you're heading, kid!”

Ben burst into tears. “No!”

Han didn’t relent, clearly frustrated that the boy refused to look at him. “Do you want us to send you away?”
“No!”

“Do you hate us?” There was a weariness in his voice that hadn't been there before. Rey wished Ben had just been honest with them, but he was defiant and withdrawn into his familiar laconic defense.

“No!

Without a doubt, she knew he never told his father the horrors he suffered, but she couldn't help wondering if only he had. If he had just opened up with them once in the years he still had a chance, once as he first had in the less than a week bonded to her, then he could have been saved. If there was one thing she knew about Han and Leia, it was that they would die to protect him. She could hear the plea in his father's voice; he only wanted to understand. “Don't we give you everything you want?”

But no matter how much his father begged, Ben didn't trust him with the monsters that haunted him. “No!”

Han hesitated. “Hold on. ‘No,’ we don’t, or ‘no’ we do…”

“I don't know!”

“That's it, kid,” Han snapped, his patience wearing thin. “We ain't leaving here until you tell me what you want from us. Huh? Why do you do this to us?”

“I don't know,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

“For Force sake, son! You do know. Knock it off. We know there's a lot going in your head that you're not saying, Hell, I'm guilty of it, too, but you have to talk to us, Ben! We can help you! What do you need?” He shook his son with a rough jolt and was finally rewarded with Ben's incisive stare.

Rey felt the walls Ben had built around himself crumble, just enough to allow hope through. He struggled with his own darkness for a moment, fearing what his father would do if he revealed his weakness, before forcing himself to answer in a small voice. “You...”
“What did you say?” Han rasped, his firm grip easing from Ben’s shoulders as he backed away.

“I...I...” He was shutting down again, staring at the ground, yearning for a sarlacc pit to form under his feet and swallow him whole. Ben had removed the proverbial mask he had already begun to hide behind. In his one-word admission, he had offered his father an outstretched hand; all Han had to do was offer his in return. If Han traded Ben's vulnerability for his own, perhaps his son would have realized that it was not him against the galaxy. Rey knew how their story ended, so she shouldn't have been surprised when he didn't.

“This was for me? Oh, swell, kid, I've always wanted an idiot son who burned down my house,” Han said, his tone clearly sarcastic. Rey had barely known the man, but she was well aware that this was Han’s way of communicating. There was even a smirk on his face, but it hurt Ben all the same. Han didn't mean to hurt him, Rey knew, but he didn’t understand his son as she did. And even she didn’t understand him as well as she had thought. Ben did not share his sense of humor, at least, not concerning serious consequences. His father seemed to recognize that he had missed something important and awkwardly rested his hand on his son's shoulder.

“You know what; I'm not mad about the house. We can fix it. I’m not that mad about the stolen speeder. I’m actually a little bit impressed you evaded half the police department and ended up on the HoloNews… but only a little bit,” he chuckled, before adopting a serious expression as he cleared his throat. He stood sternly and pointed a finger at Ben. “Don’t tell your mother I said that.” Ben nodded, the weight on his shoulders fading. “And don’t get cocky, you still need a lot of work before you’re any good as a pilot.” Han leaned down, sighing, and Rey believed that Han could have said anything in that moment, and Ben would have listened. “But that’s not why I came back here.”

_Tell him you love him, tell him he’s good, tell him you’re sorry, tell him happy birthday, tell him…_

“You’ve got to stop hurting people, kid. You hurt your mom’s career at the Senate, you made me disqualify for the cup, for what? Now all the old coot said to you at that dinner was 'pleasant dreams.' You're lucky he's not pressing charges, all you gotta do is go back to his...”

“No!” Ben screamed, twisting out of his father's grasp. “I won't go back there!”

“Like hell you won't!” Han shouted back, struggling to subdue his son. Rey could feel Ben's emotions immediately overwhelming him in the Force. Each breath became more constricting, the tingle of the Force under his skin had become a burning torrent. The whispers of the officers behind him, the smell of the smoke in the air, the whiskey on his father's breath and the fire in his eyes, the tension in his father's fingers on his arm, every thundering heartbeat in the Force of sentient beings in the near vicinity... all of it overstimulated him, splintering his control over the Force. He could sense himself unraveling, which only served to further erode his limited restraint. “Calm down!”
Rey knew it wouldn’t work. He couldn’t just “wish” himself better. The darkness had an influence over him that he couldn’t entirely control. He could try to be like they all he wanted, but he would fail. He did. He needed help understanding it, not suppressing it. She had made the mistake of underestimating the darkness in him, believing he could easily turn his back on it, but it wasn’t that simple. His parents should have learned that. Han should have never confronted him on that skyway, hoping he could turn him. They didn’t understand the power of the darkness, but she was beginning to.

“Let go!” Ben begged as he tried to escape. “I don't want to hurt you!” Han loosened his grip on his arm, allowing him to jerk it away. Han's eyes betrayed the hurt he felt at his son's words. Ben wrapped his arms around himself protectively as he backed away, trembling as he searched for an outlet or an escape. Rey could feel his emotions spiraling; it wouldn't be enough. Ben, as young as he was, understood that quickly as well. He dug his fingers into his hair, covering his ears. Curled in upon himself, he squeezed his eyes shut, willing his emotions away. He was teetering on the edge, counting each breath in hope the pressure in his chest would fade. A warm hand on his shoulder should have been soothing, but he inhaled sharply, causing something inside him to snap.

Rey winced as the Force wave leveled everyone standing around him. It would agitate Han, of course, but it would confirm to the officers and neighbors standing around them that all their opinions were right about Ben Solo. Her bondmate looked up at the destruction in his wake to find his father already standing over him. “Get up,” Han demanded. Ben chewed on his lip roughly as he stared at the older Solo, the pain soothing him. “Are you trying to kill me, son?”

Ben said nothing, but for once she was privy to his thoughts. He was sickened by the thought that Han would think he would ever intentionally hurt his own father. His conviction caused a rueful tightness in her own throat.

What happened to you, Ben? How could this lost little boy become Kylo Ren?

“What am I supposed to do here?” His father knelt in front of him, his usual aloof bravado exchanged for a tense awkwardness she recognized more in his son than him. Not that I knew him very well, Rey reminded herself. Han had been the father she'd always wanted in the short time she'd spent with him. It broke her heart that it took his death to finally reach Ben.

Han sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I'm not good at this, kid. I never say the right thing. But I promised you when you were a baby that I’d keep us going in the right direction, even if we got a little lost along the way. I meant it. So how do we fix what's...wrong with you? I can help you.”

“It doesn't matter,” Ben whispered, Snoke's proselytization repeating endlessly in his head, the words so entrenched in his own thoughts that they had become his own.
They don't love you... they never loved you... they lie to you... you're a burden... they would be happier without you... they only want to fix what is wrong with you... when they can't, they will abandon you... they will betray you...

“You say you care. You don't care. Nobody cares. I know you don't.” There was an enmity to Ben's tone, a darkness that terrified his father. Rey could see that Han's fears stemmed from the sudden darkness in his son, but Ben only saw the terror in his eyes as fear of him – the monster.

“How could you say that? Your mother and I have given you everything you need. Any other kid your age would be happy to have –”

“I don't want those things!” Ben balled his fists to contain the Force that tingled in his hands, itching for release.

“Son, you should be grateful to have those 'things,'” Han said sharply, his finger pointed at his son in accusation. “You should be grateful to have a family! I grew up on the streets with nothing! No home to burn down, no parents' lives to ruin. I had to fight to survive! You have everything a kid like me ever wanted, and you act like it’s nothing!”

“I don’t care! They’re just things! What good's a family if you're never here! You never listen! One day you won’t want me anymore! Because I'm bad! I tried, but I can't be good!”

Ben ran.

He ran from the officers, the firefighter droids and the neighbors. He ran from the disappointment of his father. His thoughts centered on a place to hide, a lake or an ocean to lull him to sleep, as his feet carried him down a path through a meadow. The darkness seemed to fade with every step he took toward his destination. It was the first time in Ben's memories that she had seen his thoughts brighten to something almost... happy. There was a strong pull from the Force as he started scrambling over a large rock outcropping, calling to the light inside him. The light was bright, blinding, greater than anything she had ever felt in him. Whatever this place was, it was his literal light in the darkness.

It'll be okay, he promised himself. I'll just go to sleep and see her, and she'll tell me it's... A strong arm pulled him backward off the rocks.
“Damn it, Ben, you can't just run away every time we try to talk to you!” his father said, voice thick with frustration as he struggled with his son. Ben's eyes welled with tears as he accepted that he couldn’t escape, surrendering silently, his light and hopes fading away as if they had never existed in the first place. He met his father's eyes as he waited for further discipline. Han sighed. “Don't look at me like that, son.”

When Ben didn't respond, Han scuffed at the dirt with his boot. “You have your mother's eyes.” Ben did not break his silence with an answer, instead, he narrowed his eyes and tilted his head slightly in confusion.

Han sighed again, scratching the back of his head. “Look, before when you said... you're not bad, okay? You're not the easiest kid, but you're my son, so what did I expect? I won't pretend I was the best kid, either. I get it. I should tell you to play with your simulator or learn a new language or do your weird writing thing. We can pretend that was my advice, okay? But since you're my son, what I would do, if I were you, is open up the HoloNet and watch holovids without the filters, or eat all the sweets Leia keeps in the closet, or get into the whiskey on the top shelf or find myself a girl… they're fun. Hold hands or whatever kids do at your age. You know... normal trouble-making stuff.” Han winked conspiratorially.

Rey could see how Han was trying desperately to reach his son. The problem was, he was so focused on the wrong Ben had done that he hadn’t stopped to wonder why he had done it. Without the Force, Ben needed help that Han couldn’t give him. “Look, kid I… What do you say we go back to the Falcon and watch Moray and Faz.”

Ben might have smirked in response to his father, though she couldn't sense the mirth she had before. He must have done something, however, brightened up in his own way, because Han relaxed in return. “I haven't watched that in years.”

“No, of course not; I knew that.” Han cleared his throat, glancing away. “But what about watching it for old time's sake?”

Ben nodded, and Han wrapped his arm tightly around his shoulder, smiling as he looked down at his son. This time Rey could feel the warmth in Ben and knew he was smiling back. It broke her heart and mended it with the same simple gesture between father and son.

The memory fractured suddenly; the edges were jagged, and the picture was broken and stuttering like an old schematic in the corroding remnants of ships in the Starship Graveyard. It reminded her of the first flashes of memories she had witnessed. The warmth was gone, the voices dark and distorted. “Let's go,” Han suggested, “Maybe later, I'll show you how to—”
The memory stopped abruptly, leaving only darkness for a moment. The memory hadn’t finished, but it was almost as if he had purposely forgotten any of the good parts.

It had become clear to Rey that the Force was trying to show her something. It had selected particular memories to share with her, and she suspected she would see exactly how he fell to darkness. Perhaps, it showed the events that led to the death of her parents. No matter how angry she was for what he had done, it hurt her to watch him suffer, knowing how it would end. There was a part of her that was growing to understand Ben Solo, and she hated it, because if she could see it, why hadn’t they?
Warning! This chapter and the following chapters are very dark chapters. Rey is reliving some of Kylo's darkest memories. If you're concerned about a trigger, it is likely in here. There is graphic violence, many characters deaths, physical torture, psychological torture, grooming of a young child, gaslighting, abuse, manipulation, you name it. If you have a specific trigger, it's better to play it safe and message me with concerns as there are many specific violent scenarios encountered here. Nothing written here is worth putting yourself through mental duress. I would be more than happy to piece together parts of the chapters or give a detailed overview as I understand they are important chapters.
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
A new memory appeared, only adding to her conflicted feelings.

Ben was sitting with his family at an ornate table, and he seemed… happier. Both of his parents were sitting at the table with him, and she felt his excitement by their presence and desire to hold their attention. Though she expected Ben to be a quiet and withdrawn child, as he was as an adult, she found him quite needy. Perhaps he still was.

Rey could feel his desire to be good, to prove he was worthy of their love. He was constantly fixated on gaining their approval, and Rey couldn’t understand why he would measure his worth by other's standards. Kylo clearly didn’t care what anyone thought of him. He was skilled, intelligent, and quite strong, why had Ben been so plagued with thoughts of inadequacy and disappointment in the eyes of others?

As a lowly scavenger, Rey knew that most of the galaxy judged the value of someone by their status and importance to others, a sentiment Rey knew from the throne room that Kylo accepted as truth. It made sense from his upbringing; he was the son of legends, he was already important enough by the galaxy’s standards. Why then, did he still torment himself with a desire to be worthy? Why had he cared what strangers whispered? He had his family, and his thoughts made it clear that they tried harder to be present after he set fire to the house. Rey was grateful that they tried to do right by him. They loved him. It may not have saved him, but it was better than giving up on him as her parents did to her. “My tutor says I’m ready to skip forward another academic year,” Ben said, leaning forward in his excitement.

Leia was scanning through a report on a datapad. “Of course, you are. I wouldn’t expect anything less from an Organa,” she replied. “Now get your elbows off the table. You may not be a prince, but you will behave like one.”

Ben huffed but did as he was told. “I beat the simulator in ten minutes today.”

“See?” Han piped in over a mouthful of food. “He’s got Solo blood in him too… somewhere.”

Leia lifted her eyes to glare at them both. “Well, that ‘Solo blood’ is giving him horrible posture. Sit up straight, Ben.”

Han smirked across the table at his son. “Ah, lay off him, princess.”
“It’s my responsibility to prepare him for the future, Han. He’ll thank me when he’s older.”

“I flew onto an Imperial Destroyer,” Ben continued as he shoved a large bite into his mouth. “I blew up the hangar and flew back out through fire before it collapsed. You should’ve seen it! And I blew up the bridge without engaging any of the enemy fighters at all!”

“Ben, chew like you have a secret, dear,” Leia said, without looking up.

Ben giggled as his father showed him the food in his mouth, but he swallowed his laughter contritely when Leia pinned him with a withering stare. Han cleared his throat as his attention shifted back to his meal. “Don’t get cocky kid, wait until you’ve got a real ship under your hands.” Han… wasn’t the best at compliments. Rey knew that from spending the short amount of time with him that she did. Ben, however, seemed immediately affected by it, even before the whisper confirmed his fears.

**You’ll never be good enough for them…**

There was an edge of resentment to his tone when he spoke again. “Does that mean I can go back to flying real ships?”

“You come from Naberrie, Amidala, and Organa blood,” Leia cut in, perhaps sensing how the conversation would turn, “a long line of influential politicians. Remember what I told you about our responsibility to create a better galaxy, Ben. You can change it for the better, but not from a cockpit.”

“Hey!” Han whined in mock petulance. “I think I’ve done plenty to help the galaxy from my cockpit.”

“Han.”

He shrugged when she looked up at him. “What? I’m just trying to help.”

Leia rolled her eyes before shifting her attention back to her datapad. “When have you ever helped?”
“The Death Star.” Han winked at Ben when she didn’t have a retort.

Ben, however, was not in the joking mood. “I don’t know if I want to be a politician.” Rey thought about him as a Senator, fighting for the right side. *What if he had used his powers for good? Would the galaxy be any different?*

“You are privileged, Ben,” Leia said, setting her datapad down to finally meet his stare, “and it is your duty to the galaxy to use that privilege to help others. You are destined for greatness.”

Rey could feel the pressure of her words spike an anxiety inside him, unraveling his tightly coiled emotions. “Do I even get a choice?”

Leia seemed to sense the change in her son. “Of course, we just want what is best for you.”

*What’s best for you, or the galaxy…*

Ben echoed the sentiment, the darkness leeching into his thoughts. *You never cared what’s best for me.*

“How am I supposed to be a politician when I can’t even control the Force inside me?” he said.

“It’s not like you can be a pilot, either,” Han said. “You might explode the ship with your mind.” Ben shot up from the table in anger.

Leia sighed. “What your father is trying to say is we all know where the… strengths you were born with would benefit the galaxy the most, and we’re encouraging you toward that very important destiny.”

“I don’t want a destiny!” Ben shouted. If Rey hadn’t been inside his mind, she would have thought the reaction overly severe to the conversation. But she felt his fear that he couldn’t become what they wanted him to be, and unfortunately, their words only fed that fear. Ben slammed the cup in his hand onto the table in his agitation, the glass breaking and slicing his hand under the force of it. Rey heard a chair scrape behind him as he fled from the table, but then his mother spoke. “Let him go, Han. You’ll only make it worse.”
You’re not good… you’re not worthy of their love… you ruined dinner… you ruined their happiness again… you ruin everything… can you do anything right… can you be what they want you to be… but the darkness can –

“Shut up!” he screamed as he fled to the solace of his room. Cradling his injured hand, he collapsed to the floor, leaning against the wall as he cried. Glass protruded from the wound, blood dripping onto the floor, but it wasn’t the physical pain that caused his tears.

“See?” Han said from the other room. “Right there, that’s what I’ve been talking about. Something’s wrong with him; the kid’s too emotional. We try to talk to him, and he throws a fit. Every time.”

“Oh, he just hasn’t been sleeping well.” Rey was dumbfounded by Leia’s dismissive tone.

You are so intelligent and observant as a general; why didn’t you see that something was happening to your own son?

Han lowered his voice, but Ben heard him all the same. “You like to talk about Naberrie and Amidala and Organa bloodlines, but we both know there’s another bloodline you refuse to talk about.”

“Han…” Leia said in warning.

“Stop trying to make him an Organa or Solo, when you know the kid’s a Skywalker.”

Ben gripped his fists in anger, plunging the piece of glass deeper into his hand. Rey sensed that Ben didn’t know why he hated being included in the Skywalker legacy, only that when they were disappointed in him, Anakin Skywalker was the one they compared him with. Anakin Skywalker… not Darth Vader. It was a curious distinction to Rey, but one he didn’t contemplate.

“And what?” Leia’s voice carried from the other room. “You think he’d make a better Jedi than a Senator?”

Han’s next words sent a shudder through both young Ben and Rey, for entirely different reasons.
“I’m just saying, he is more like his grandfather than any of us.” Why can’t I be like them? Ben wondered. Why do I have to be like him? Rey knew it was not the first time he had heard the comparison; she sensed his loathing toward the man he had never met. Ironic, she realized, that he would grow to idolize that man, fearing that he was not enough like him.

One day… the whisper promised, you will realize the true power of your bloodline.

And with those words, Rey understood that they had not yet told him who his grandfather was.

What will he do when he finds out?

“That Jedi life may work for my brother, but I would never want that for our son,” Leia insisted. “He already struggles with darkness; you know how that ended for… his grandfather. I’ll teach him to hide those emotions behind a politician’s mask. I learned it early, he’ll learn it too. And we’ll just work more to teach him how to suppress the Force. I lived fine without it, so can he.” Rey wondered if he would have been happier if he could have.

A new memory emerged, though at first Rey thought the last memory had repeated.

Ben was sitting rigid and taciturn at the same ornate table, staring at a plate of food that made Rey’s mouth water. She had never seen food in the amount and selection he had in front of him. What was worse, he wasn’t eating a single bite of it. He had pierced a piece on his utensil and was dragging it aimlessly around the plate. It physically hurt Rey to see food that had not been consumed. Until she had spent time at the Resistance, she had never witnessed someone waste food before. Her aversion to his meal habits was quickly forgotten when she realized why.

His thoughts before had centered upon a yearning for his parents’ attention, a desire to be good enough for them, but these thoughts were different. This was the first family dinner with both parents in months, but all Ben wanted to do was escape from that house. His teeth clenched as his parents carried on in – what Rey suspected – was not the first argument of the day.

Leia hadn’t asked Han to do anything, but she must have given some facial expression or signal, because he huffed in response before she whispered fiercely, “Now.”

Ben was staring at his own plate, but Rey could hear the exasperation already in his father’s voice. “Gee, I must have forgotten I was speaking with royalty.”
“Force, Han, you are so… so….”

“That bad, huh?” Rey could hear the smile in Han’s voice. Ben braced himself for his mother’s reaction.

“Is everything a joke to you?”

Han placed his hand over his heart in mock offense. “Hey, you love that about me.”

_No one loves that about you_, Ben thought to himself. He stared down at the table, fighting the anger that was boiling up inside him and the darkness beguiling him to help him ease that anger.

“No one loves that about you, Ben thought to himself. He stared down at the table, fighting the anger that was boiling up inside him and the darkness beguiling him to help him ease that anger.

“Not when I’m trying to have a serious conversation,” Leia hissed through her teeth, refusing to raise her voice at the dinner table. Clearly some parts of being raised a princess just stuck.

_What did you do now, Ben?_

“I’m not interested in having a serious conversation, Your Worship.”

_Listen to them…_

“For the last time, stop calling me that!”

_You cause them to fight like this_...

“Fine, Princess, no need to blow a fuse.”

_They would be happier without you…_

Their words were rapid-fire, and Ben did his best to ignore them. Judging by his thoughts, Rey knew he believed it was best not to get involved, because he was convinced he would only make it
worse.

Leia sighed. “Do you care at all?”

*This is all your fault…*

“Hey, now don’t go twisting my words again,” Han’s voice had gained a more frustrated tone. “I do care. More than anyone else sitting here. Probably.”

“You sure have a funny way of showing it!” Rey didn’t need Ben’s thoughts to know that it wouldn’t end well. Eying Ben’s food on his plate, the food he was still pushing around aimlessly, she suddenly didn’t feel hungry, either.

“Sorry, sweetheart, dinner first, no sense in letting the food go cold on me, too,” Han said, before gesturing to Ben with his utensil. “Eat up, kid.”

“If you’re in the mood for another serving of Leia’s version of a perfect family, then be my guest,” Ben grumbled. “But save room for a dessert. Tonight it’s accusations covered in witty comebacks with a sprinkling of resentment. As tempting as it is, I think I’ll pass.”

*How often was it like this?* Rey wondered.

Both parents ignored Ben as if he hadn’t even spoken; they were too busy glaring at each other across the table. “Stop avoiding this, Han. This is more important than food.”

Han fiddled with his fork, something – Rey learned through Ben’s thoughts – that profoundly irritated his mother. “The problem can wait another twenty minutes.”

The irritation clearly had its desired effect; Leia’s lips were pursed, her jaw tight. When she finally spoke, her words had lost their plea. “It’s always later! Or next week! Or next month! Now!”

“But how can I think on an empty stomach?”
“This isn’t funny, Han! Something is wrong with your son!” Leia shouted, and Ben’s fists clenched as his own anger escalated. He stared at his plate with such intensity, Rey thought it might shatter from his thoughts.

_They think something is “wrong” with you... No matter what you do, you will never be good enough… Do they love you… Do they want you… Or will you only ever be nothing but a burden to them… Worthless…_

The humor had disappeared from Han’s voice. “How is that my fault?”

Ben exhaled slowly through his nose.

_Do you have to ask? She’ll blame you for leaving for months, you’ll blame her for caring more about the New Republic than us. We all know how it ends._

Rey wondered if Leia would take the bait as Ben suggested, knowing the general she would become, but she did not disappoint when she replied sharply. “Don’t you dare make this about my career!”

_Would they even care if you were gone…_

“Shut up!” Ben screamed, slamming his fists on the table, disrupting the dinnerware. His hands were no longer those of a boy, but he was not yet a man. She wondered how old he was. She wondered how old she had been, what she had been doing, as the darkness slowly consumed Ben Solo.

_Why can’t they see what this is doing to him?_

“Watch your mouth!” Han said sternly, pointing his utensil at Ben. “Don’t you talk to your mother that way!”

“Why? I learned from the best!”

Han stood, glaring at his son across the table. Ben’s eyes shifted down to his plate, tense as he
waited for his father’s reaction in uneasy silence. Rey couldn’t see the expression on Han’s face, but based upon the split second of pain she witnessed before Ben looked away, she didn’t think it was the anger that Ben believed was there. At least, it wasn’t anger directed at Ben. Leia said nothing to ease the tension, or perhaps she believed any words would only escalate the argument further. The silence stretched between them all until Han moved. Without a word, he picked up his plate from the table and left the room, something loud crashing on the other side of the house.

*Run away like you always do,* Ben thought miserably.

The memory changed to a new one, but the setting didn’t. Ben was still seated at the same table, still staring down at his untouched plate, but the darkness in the Force around him was suffocating. Rey assumed it must have been several years since his last memory, solely based upon the sheer weight of his darkness.

*What did I miss?*

He wasn’t asking himself what he had done wrong or why he was "bad" anymore. It was almost as if he had stopped trying to win his parents’ favor – he had accepted everything the others had said about him. She wanted to go back, to see the moment it changed. That was what she was there for, wasn’t it; to see the moment it all began to spiral? Rey grew frustrated with the Force, balking at having to witness his memories without an answer for why the darkness had grown.

*What happened to him?*

The Force answered as it was wont to do, through feelings and perceptions. It guided her to focus on his thoughts, which weren’t centered on one particular event that was drawing his agitation. His anger lacked a source, a defining moment that he drew his darkness from. She felt the same problems she had felt in him from the beginning. He had continued to feel the pressure of living up to the expectations thrust on him by the legacy of his family. He had continued to disappoint those around him because he was different, because he couldn’t control his darkness, because he was *too much like his grandfather.* The whispers continued to shape his thoughts, and his parents didn’t see what it was doing to him, or convinced themselves they didn’t. They fought more as he pulled away, because he had been the one holding two very different people together. It was simple to see the progression looking back, and Rey realized perhaps there hadn’t been a single cause. Perhaps *that* was the point of witnessing all those memories.

Ben had believed it was one defining moment that had caused his fall, but maybe that was too simplistic; maybe those memories were all pieces of a puzzle, each seemingly insignificant piece fitting together to create an inevitability; a perfect storm. No single event, no single person, was responsible for his turn, and yet, all of it was. If that was the case – if it wasn’t just Snoke or Luke or his parents or his own darkness, if it wasn't only that night at the temple as he had suggested –
“Why were you in the Senate building today?”

Ben's eyes darted up from his plate to his mother sitting at the other end of the long table that stretched between them. He studied her for a moment, gauging something from her reaction. His eyes drifted back to his plate, and the air became uncomfortable and heavy in his silence. The only sound in the room was the irritating scratch of his utensil on the plate in front of him.

This time, her tone was less casual. “Ben, why were you in the Senate building today?”

“Why do you care?” he responded with a petulant sigh, his tone clipped and abrasive. He hadn't even bothered to look up from his food that he had no interest in.

Leia was having none of his deflection. There was a loud clang as she slammed down her own utensils on the table. Judging by the jolt through his body and his eyes snapping to hers in rapt attention, it was something quite abnormal for her. She carefully folded her napkin across her lap with trembling hands before continuing. “What business did you have with the Arkanis Senator and that guest you attacked at the benefit dinner?”

His breath caught in his throat. She knows. “People don’t lie to the ones they love,” she reminded him. He wished broken promises had been included in that sentiment as well. Ben wouldn't lie to her, but he couldn’t tell her the truth, either.

You know what happens if you tell her the truth... Snoke whispered in his head.

There was still a twist of revulsion in his stomach when he heard the creature's voice. Rey wondered when that changed, if it ever did. Ben could feel the heat of his mother's stare as he hardened his face into an unreadable mask – a “politician’s mask.” He recalled the steps Snoke had taught him to protect his thoughts and feelings from other Force-sensitives. Rey was taken aback by his gratitude toward the monster, believing someone cared enough to help him when no one else would. She knew Snoke never cared; why couldn't her bondmate see it? Ben carefully raised the barriers around his mind, the effort strenuous and incomplete in his inexperience. Leia's eyes widened as she sensed him withdraw from their familial connection in the Force.

“Ben!”
Why would you care now? I tried to tell you before, but you were too busy. I tried to get away from him, but you wouldn't listen. Now that he is showing me the failures of the New Republic, showing me that all your time away from us has been for nothing, showing me what the galaxy needs, now you care?

He lowered his eyes from hers, desperate to avoid the look of despair, as he shoveled a bite of food into his mouth. Forcing himself to swallow, to pretend that everything was all right as they always did, he grasped the edge of the table to center himself. Rey could sense that Leia had never questioned him like this before. He pushed more food onto his utensil, scooping it past his lips, before answering around the mouthful with feigned ignorance. “Why, uh, why would you think I went somewhere with Snoke?”

Leia's gasp created an immediate tension in his body. She didn't need to say another word for him to know that he had just inadvertently told her everything she needed to know. “Ben,” she breathed. “How long has this been going on?”

He swallowed wearily, refusing to meet her eyes. He continued to shovel bites of food in his mouth, to belay his fear, overriding his desire to gag.

*If you tell them... they will see your darkness... they will send you away... when that doesn’t work... you know what they will do to you...* Snoke whispered in warning in his mind.

Ben hoped that Snoke was wrong, that they would never send him away, but he still found himself too terrified to test it. “It's none of your concern,” he said as steadily as he could muster, “Waste your time on the New Republic like you always do. My life never mattered before; there's no point in pretending now.”

Leia's hands slammed down onto the table as she rose from her seat. His eyes followed her movement automatically, and he saw the fear in hers. She stared at him as if she was only now truly seeing him for the first time, and, perhaps, there was a part of him that she was. “What has he done to you?” she grit out.

“Nothing.” He said it as if it were true. Rey felt the call from inside of him, the bright light of truth, to reveal all the secrets that he had built up around himself. It begged him to see that he had yearned for this moment for years. Leia was listening; she wanted to know what was wrong rather than pretend he wasn't suffering. There was a hand outstretched to finally help him, but he wouldn't take it. He carefully set his utensils down on either side of his plate, wiping his mouth with his napkin before setting it on the table in a grand display. He pushed his chair back, prepared to stand in an effort to escape her pointed stare.
“You are not going anywhere!” Leia snapped, “You are staying right here with me and explaining what has happened to you, or so help me, Ben, I'll drag you with me to the Senator and her associate and find out myself. No one is leaving until I get to the bottom of this.” Ben felt the anger burning in his chest, flickering down his arms into his fingertips that were pressed against the table-top in a challenge. His mother stared him down, mirroring his posture. Her eyes looked at him – truly looked at him – for the first time in as long as he could remember. She saw him for what he was, not what she wanted him to be. Her face softened. “Ben, if he... hurt you, in any way, you can tell me. I won't be mad. I can protect you.” Rey sighed in relief. Understanding – this was what he needed all along. Leia had stopped pretending he would be all right long enough to notice that he wouldn't. This was everything he needed, but Ben didn't agree.

He scoffed, before a laugh escaped his lips. It was a humorless, sordid thing. “Can you?” Rey could hear the cruel smile in his voice. “It's a little late for that, isn't it?”

*Where were you!* his mind screamed. *Where were you years ago when I begged you to listen about the whispers, when I crawled into your bed at night after my nightmares, when you told me you would never let anything bad happen to me, and I was foolish enough to believe you? But in the morning, you would pretend that the whispers and the terrible things that happened in my nightmares were all just my imagination! Where were you when I tried to tell you about the darkness, when I tried to tell you what he was doing to me, when I begged you to listen? Every call for help went unanswered. You never protected me; why should I believe you now?*

Ben didn't scream any of those accusations at his mother, the one person who needed to hear them. She loved him, Rey knew without a doubt she would have listened, she would have tried to help him. He didn't give her any insight into his cruel behavior, however. Rey wondered if he had done the same to her. Was the true Ben Solo hiding behind everything that wasn’t said? What had *she* missed? “And what if I don't want your help?”

Leia was stunned into silence. It was as if the woman instantly aged before her eyes. Rey could see the illusion of her perfect family threatening to crumble around her, but she drew strength from the Force, standing strong against the pain that would tear her down. She stood against the darkness that was tearing her family apart, against the past she refused to face. The Force was ignited in the light that buried her agony. Her biological father had killed her mother. He had blown up her home, killed her adoptive parents and the people she loved. He had committed mass murder, and she shared his tainted blood. Her first love had died in her arms. Her marriage to Han was failing. Her son was troubled, more than she had realized, and showed signs of his grandfather's darkness. The New Republic was failing. She should have been lost, but the light inside her gave her the strength to weather it all. She still suffered. It was too much for any one person to face, and Ben's own struggles had slipped through the cracks. Still, Rey was thankful that in that moment she was present. “How long has he been turning you against us?”

Anger darkened his hopeless words. “Long enough.”
There was an immediate pain that pierced through his mind. He cried out and fell to his knees, covering his ears as he struggled to block out the sensation. Something foreign, yet terrifyingly familiar, seeped into his mind and paralyzed his thoughts, clawing and digging for something. Images of his own family attempting to kill him in every way he could imagine flashed through his mind. She knows... the voice whispered. She knows… they will send you away... they will abandon you... they will betray you... then they will kill you because of your darkness… I’ve seen it… I can help you before it’s too late…

“No!” he screamed, refusing to listen to the voice. “You're a liar! Get out! Get out of my head!” His fear consumed him, building and strengthening in the Force. They all knew he was losing control, and they all knew the consequences if he did. Ben squeezed his eyes shut in a futile attempt to shut out both his emotions and the monster in his mind. He struggled against it until he felt his mother grasp his hands, tearing them away from the side of his head.

She struggled with him as he tried to fight her off. “Ben, is that Snoke? Is he one of the whispers?” With the uncontrollable power in his hands, he was a weapon, he could kill her.

*Use the darkness*, Snoke suggested.

In desperation, Ben released himself to the power of the darkness, intentionally sabotaging the years of barricades he had created against its reaching depths it could never be extracted from. A sharp cold burst through him like rushing water through a broken valve, feeding on the fear to soothe the escalating chaos. It was working. Surrendering to the intoxicating power of the darkness, he allowed his head to fall forward and closed his eyes in relief. Control over his emotions slowly returned. The weight on his chest diminished; he could breathe again. That is, until a hand brushed the hair back from his face.

“Get away from me!” he shouted instinctively. He startled, the cruelty in his voice instantly sobering. Leia stumbled away from him, falling backward into the table and sending dishware shattering to the floor. She said nothing as she stared in horror at her son. Han staggered into the room moments later to investigate the commotion. Ben turned toward his father, and Rey watched his face twist in terror.

“Holy Hell,” he whispered, his hand moving to the blaster at his hip. “Leia, what happened? His eyes are black and –” evil, Ben fished from a quick skim of his father's mind.

“I don't know,” his mother lied, her eyes never leaving Ben's. If she had intended to win her son’s favor with the secret, it didn’t work. All Ben focused on was her lie. According to her, people
didn’t lie to the ones they loved. But she lied to Han, even though she claimed to love him. He feared she lied to him as well. Why did you keep that secret from Han? Leia reached for her son, but he flinched. She reluctantly lowered her outstretched hand. “There’s just so much darkness.”

Han stepped forward into the room with his hands extended, as well. He wasn’t trying to reach for Ben, however, only calm him, as if he were trying to quiet a caged animal. His attention was focused solely on his son as he walked further into the room. Ben recognized the look in his eyes from the other children and neighbors and police and teachers and strangers who witnessed his outbursts. Fear. They all saw the same thing in him. Monster. “Leia, lock yourself in our chambers, then call your brother.” With one last tearful look, she fled from the room, giving her husband as wide a birth as her son. Ben winced as her door shut him out with a loud whoosh. Once she was gone, Han abandoned his attempt to reach Ben. He backed from the dining area, his eyes still fixed on his son in warning.

“Stay here.” He pressed his palm into the controls, and the door to the dining area slammed shut with a taunting echo. Ben shut his eyes to escape the terror on their faces that was burned into his retinas. He collapsed against the wall and slid down to curl upon himself. As the darkness faded, the fear set in.

_They will abandon you, but I won’t. You are worthless to them, but I know your true potential._

In that moment, as the room was locked from the outside, casting him in darkness, and he wondered if Snoke was right. Rey began to understand how Ben could join that monster. He felt so worthless, he trusted the first person who told him he wasn’t. The creature had manipulated him to be exactly what he wanted him to be. Ben thought he had made a choice, but all he did was allow Snoke to lead him into his trap.

The next memory was eerily similar. His parents were seated at the other end of the table from Ben. It was clear that a short time had passed since the last memory, as his thoughts were still analyzing and reanalyzing what had happened. His hands were clenched in fists as he stared down at his plate, not bothering with the pretense of eating.

“I forgot to express my congratulations on your championship win, Han,” Leia said with sincerity.

“Uh, thank you,” he replied without the usual tinge of sarcasm, “congratulations on passing that, er, Senate thing.”

Leia chuckled softly. “The bill? I’m surprised you were paying attention.”

Ben braced for another argument, but was pleasantly surprised with his father’s answer. “I do. Pay attention. More than you know.” The words broke through Ben’s stormy thoughts. He lifted his
eyes to watch his mother reach across the table, squeezing his father’s hand. His father returned the gesture by raising her hand to his lips, kissing each of her fingers gently. There were no snide remarks, no defensiveness, no battle of wits. Their hands remained clasped as they both went back to staring at their own datapads, eating their food contentedly in the silence.

It was the most peaceful moment he had witnessed between them in a long while, and he felt it was because he wasn’t sharing a part of it with them. They were both on top of their professions, equals, each powerful in their own right. They had earned the other’s love with their success. He would never be valuable unless he was someone important like they were.

He looked up when he heard whispering as Leia showed Han a message on her datapad. Both of their eyes turned to him, noticing him for the first time since they had sat down at dinner, and he wanted nothing more than for the peace to return to what it had been.

“Ben,” Han said, clearing his throat after she nudged him with an elbow, “how do you feel about your uncle teaching you more about the Force? I think we all know your mother and I are out of our depth here.”

“That’s fine, I guess.” His eyes were suddenly everywhere but on the heavy stares across the table. “When is he coming?”

“We think,” his mother drawled, eying her husband nervously. “You should join him at his training temple.”

Ben was confused. They knew his desire to be a pilot. They had never mentioned their hopes for him to train before; they had both actively ignored his Force abilities, asking him to suppress them, not explore them. As far as he knew, they both wished he had been born without the Force. “You want me to train as a Jedi?”

“Yeah, uh, Luke thinks it will help you control your…powers,” Han said, and Ben began to wonder if their intentions were less about bettering him and more about fixing him.

“But I don’t want to be a Jedi.”

Leia sounded as if she were on the verge of tears, something he had heard rarely from his mother. “Give it some time, sweetheart; maybe you will.”
He began to understand then; this was how he could be worthy. His parents grew angry with him when he couldn’t control the Force, but they also talked about how powerful he could become. Leia pushed him to be "someone important to the galaxy." If he was the best at what he did, like they were, then they would see him. If he became powerful, someone important, then he would deserve their love. The galaxy would look at him as something other than a monster.

They wanted him to become a Jedi like his uncle and like his father before him. They had compared Ben to his grandfather since he was young, and now he understood why. This was the life they wanted for him. If he became the powerful Jedi hero like Anakin Skywalker, then he would become someone important to the galaxy, then he would be important to them. It wasn’t the life he wanted for himself, but if he could become as great as his grandfather was, then maybe he would finally be worthy of their love.

Rey listened to the thoughts he was convinced were truths, and she began to understand the man he was a little better. To someone who thought the way she did, his actions were evil; but she was starting to understand how profoundly differently he experienced the galaxy. What had been her truth was not necessarily his. She had been right before. It was impossible to understand him through her own worldview. Though she was certain his beliefs were skewed, as long as he believed them, then understanding his beliefs and motivations was the only way she could empathize and reason with him. Kylo didn’t want power because he was evil; he wanted power because he believed it made him worthy of those things he had always wanted. She just had to prove it didn’t.

He sighed in defeat, abandoning his own hopes and dreams in an instant as if they were meaningless. “Okay, when do I leave?”

“We will leave as soon as we’re packed,” Han said, his own voice tight and abnormally quiet.

“How long is each training year?” It hurt Ben to imagine being separated from them for what could amount to months at a time, but they were gone so often anyway, he thought perhaps scheduled breaks would give them a chance to schedule vacations together. Perhaps they would miss him. “When are my breaks to come home?”

The look shared between his parents stirred a heavy, bitter feeling in his stomach. He tried his best to swallow past the tightness in his throat as his vision blurred. “I’m not coming home again, am I?”

Leia wouldn’t look at him as she spoke, “Training takes years. By the time you become a Jedi Knight, you’ll be an adult, Ben. You’ll have a life of your own.”
Snoke was right.

Rey listened to his internal dialogue, and suddenly the path before him was becoming clearer, like walking into the eye of a dust storm. His parents thought they were setting him on a new path to something better, but his internal truths were so twisted that they didn’t see where it would end. There were still so many unanswered questions, but she could see the outcome now. They weren’t terrible parents; they were only trying to do what they believed was best. They could have saved him if they had only had the benefit of foresight. Without it, Ben Solo’s fall was all but inevitable.
Warning! This chapter and the following chapters are very dark chapters. Rey is reliving some of Kylo's darkest memories. If you're concerned about a trigger, it is likely in here. There is graphic violence, many characters deaths, physical torture, psychological torture, grooming of a young child, gaslighting, abuse, manipulation, you name it. If you have a specific trigger, it's better to play it safe and message me with concerns as there are many specific violent scenarios encountered here. Nothing written here is worth putting yourself through mental duress. I would be more than happy to piece together parts of the chapters or give a detailed overview as I understand they are important chapters.

On a lighter note, I always imagined the 'Mirrorbright' song having the same melody as 'Once Upon a December.'
Jedi Knight Training

Chapter Summary

Fun fact - the characters introduced in this chapter are repurposed Legends characters, scroll down to the end notes for the names of the actors and actresses I imagined for the characters.

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
The memory faded into a new one.

Han and Leia stood before him as he begged with an unsteady pitch to his voice.

“Please... don’t make me stay. Let's go home. I’ll be better, I promise. I’ll control it, I’ll do anything. I don’t want to be a Jedi. If you love me, please, let me come home,” his voice cracked. “Please... don’t leave me.” Rey could feel the agony tearing him apart. His mother embraced him.

“Ben, it's only goodbye for a little while. We'll come back for you, I promise,” Leia whispered.
Those words... my dream. Could that dream have been about Ben the whole time? Was it his memory I was reliving, not my own?

“Then why does this feel like goodbye forever?” Rey's heart ached with his as he felt from the depths of his soul that they would never come back for him.

“We love you, Ben,” she cried, “Don’t you ever forget that.”

“Mom, wait!” he shouted after her, but she shook her head between soft sobs, as she turned back toward the ship. Ben turned toward his father, twisting his hand into the material of his father's shirt to force him to stay.

“Please... don’t do this,” Ben begged him. “I need... I need your help. There's so much darkness inside me, I don’t know how to stop it. If you leave me here, I’m so scared that I won’t be strong enough to fight it alone.”

“Look – I'm not great with this 'advice' thing, kid,” Han said distantly. “Or saying goodbye. But, it's too late for all that, son, it’s time to grow up. You've got to stop blaming everyone else for your problems. You have darkness in you that we don’t understand, you’re scaring your mother. We're as lost in this as you are, and we can’t give you the help you need. Your uncle is the only one left who can do that. This is the only way to fix you.” He reached for his son as if he would embrace him, grasp him on the shoulder, touch his cheek... but he stopped himself, dropping an object into the boy's hand instead. Ben knew what it was, but he looked down at the pair of golden dice resting in his palm. “For luck,” he whispered, refusing to meet his son's desperate, beseeching eyes, before turning back toward the Millennium Falcon.

“We're not done yet!!” Ben cried. “Turn around! At least look me in the eyes when you admit that all I’ve ever been to you is a burden. You don't want me! You are abandoning me with someone I barely know!” Han hesitated, his head dropping as he rubbed his hand over his face. “Look at me!”

“No, son,” his father said quietly, standing with his back to Ben. “I won't do that.”

“What do you think you’ll see if you do! My mother?”

“No.”
Ben’s voice trembled as he forced himself to give life to his next words. “A monster?”

“I don’t know anymore,” Han sighed, trudging back to the ship after his wife.

“Don’t make me watch you leave again in that piece of junk. You care more about that ship than you do me!” His father did not respond, which only agitated Ben more. He squeezed the pair of golden dice in his fist, shaking in anger, before throwing them at his father. They landed in the dirt at the man’s feet. “If you leave, you’re dead to me!” Ben screamed. Han picked them up, paused for a moment, then continued walking to the ship. The whispers returned.

_I told you they would leave...They do not recognize your potential... They fear your raw, untamed power... They call you a monster...But that is what makes you unique... You are truly special... If they cared, they would recognize that...But they reject you...They don’t love you... They all hate you... They lie to your face...You do everything for them... yet they throw you away like garbage... But you’re no fool...You see it... They have abandoned you... They will all betray you... And one day they will kill you because they fear your power...You belong on the dark side... The darkness realizes your true potential... I realize your true potential... Reject the Jedi... Train with me... Call me master..._ Rey’s blood ran cold as Ben hesitated, considering the words. Before, he had done everything he could to force the voice out. He didn’t obey, but he considered it.

“Hey, kid.” The boy stiffened and turned. Rey recognized the man standing in front of Ben. His hair was shorter and darker, his eyes less jaded, but she would recognize him anywhere.


“It’s Master Skywalker now. Welcome to my Jedi temple,” Luke smiled. Ben believed his parents had abandoned him, given up on him. Luke had become his last hope. _It'll be okay, he can fix me. It's Luke. He found the good in Darth Vader – the man who killed his father – and convinced him to turn on the emperor to save the galaxy. Vader was a stranger; I'm his nephew. If anyone can find the good in me, it's him_, he thought, still so optimistic that the dull ache in Rey's chest returned. It was torture, watching his inevitable fall, knowing all she could do was bear witness.

Luke turned to reveal a dozen other young students in Jedi robes behind him. “Padawans, this is Ben Solo. Ben, these are the other padawans.” She –Ben – was introduced to the other students. His memory was clouded unnaturally, almost fractured, as he was introduced to the first six.

The first student, a Mon Calamari, stepped forward. “The name is Clighal, from Mon Cala,” she
introduced herself with a giggle. Her overtunic, pants, and robes were all shades of tan, it brought out the vibrant orange of her skin. Though the young student’s energy was kind and gentle, the response Rey felt in her bondmate was bitterness and resentment. Rey wondered if Ben’s feelings arose more from his lack of desire to be there than toward the Mon Calamari herself.

She was followed by a human male who was darker in complexion like Finn. He was not as broad as her best friend, but he was taller. His smile was as warm and bright as her best friend, with an energy to match. His energy was strong. When Rey noticed his clouded eyes, she realized he used the Force exclusively to navigate and perceive the galaxy around them. He wore shades of blue that reminded her of the oceans on Ahch-To. “Hi, I’m Dal Konur, from Ord Mantell.” When Rey felt her bondmate’s resentment toward him as well, she wondered if they were Ben’s feelings in the past, as she had first believed, or Kylo’s feelings currently.

The next student was a tall, blue Twi-lek wearing robes in different shades of grey. She stepped forward with a poise and confidence that caught Ben’s attention. And Rey’s. Still, there was an animosity there she couldn’t explain. “My name is Alema, from Ryloth,” she said with vibrant red lips. It was her sparkling green eyes that Ben focused on, but there was something else there; a memory of something or someone else. The Twi-lek’s energy belonged to a warrior; it was strong and fierce, but also more jagged than Clighal or Dal’s energy had felt. The scars that painted her skin told a story of a harsh upbringing on her world. Rey knew that several of the students eventually left with Kylo after he killed the other students. Rey wondered if Alema had been one of them.

The next student was another human. He was a blonde-haired boy, paler in complexion than even Ben. The black and dark browns of his attire contrasted with his vibrant green eyes. They were oddly dark for a Jedi, Rey thought, and looked more like Kylo’s current attire. There was something else about the boy that seemed… less than friendly. “Cade Calixte, from Ossus,” he said. The burning hatred her bondmate carried toward the boy was not reserved for a stranger. These intense feelings left Rey with little doubt that she was feeling Kylo’s, not Ben’s, emotions.

Most of the students seemed close to the same age, but the last girl, a human, seemed a few years younger. “Hi, I’m Tionne. Tionne Solusar, from Rindao,” she said timidly, twisting her fingers nervously as she stared up at him. Despite her demure demeanor, her golden-brown eyes were bright and friendly. Her energy was gentle and easy-going, nothing like the anxiety she outwardly portrayed. Her tunic and trousers were shades of tan with a long green robe that contrasted well with her beautiful red curly hair. Her skin was tanned from years of exposure under a bright sun as Rey’s was, but the girl did not bear the signs physically or in her energy of the harsh upbringing on a ruthless world. There was an innocence to her energy that none of the others possessed. Rey had seen this girl, in the flashes of memories in his dreams. For the first time, she didn’t feel the anger from her bondmate that he carried toward the others. Only… sorrow.

The next boy reminded her of Poe. He was taller, and his thick, black hair was not quite as curly. They both had the same scruffy shadow of a beard. This boy was more serious as opposed to Poe’s cockiness, but the commanding eyes were the same. They were perceptive and captivating eyes,
confident, shadowed underneath bushy eyebrows. The only difference was the color. This boy had a light hazel blue to Poe's darker brown. His attire was similar to what she had seen most Jedi wear; tan pants with a mixture of browns for his tunic and robes. Though not as volatile as Ben, his Force signature was intense. *I have no doubt he would be a formidable opponent.* Rey was not sure whether that was Ben’s thought or hers.

“Kyp Durron, from Deyer,” he told Ben, never breaking eye contact. *Strength in Force Persuasion, specifically Force Fear, and Battle Precognition.* It was her bond mate’s resonant voice, a reverent pride in his tone. She wondered if he was talking directly to her, or if it was an echo of his mind’s knowledge tied to the man.

The next boy seemed a year or two older than Ben, though he had facial hair on his lip and chin that might have made him look more mature in her eyes. “Corran Horn, from Corellia.” *Strength in Psychometry and Crucitorn.* His light-colored eyes were hidden by the hair that fell in his face – long brown hair that reached his shoulders – but she could see the hardness to them. He did not strike her as a Force-sensitive. He seemed more like Han – rough, roguish and solitary. He looked like he had lived a hard life but could get himself out of any sticky situation because of it. Corron wore black pants, a darker tunic, and a sand-colored robe that was slung over his shoulder. His Force signature was calm, controlled, and unemotional. In short, he was the opposite of Ben.

The next was a tall, Khommite clone. He wore monochromatic brown, but it contrasted well with the green of his skin, which was covered with warts and knotted bony structures, including a protruding, monstrous ridge on his hairless cranium. He had webbed, clawed hands and bright yellow eyes, but they seemed kind and gentle to Rey. He wrapped Ben in a strong, unwanted, and – most definitely – unreciprocated embrace. “Dorsk 81, from Khomm,” he smiled. “You can call me Dorsk.” *Strength in Force Empathy and Force Suppression.*

A younger boy walked up to Ben. He was slimmer and shorter than the others, possibly the youngest, but it was difficult for Rey to guess their ages. He had a bubbly, genuine personality, but his dark almond eyes were deep with intellect. He had shiny, wild, spiked black hair that seemed to defy gravity. While he wore mostly brown, there was a colorful blue band that wrapped around his forehead, which matched his outer robe. *Strength in Morichro and Pyrokenisis.*

“Rayf Ysanna from Ossos,” he said with a wide smile. “Please tell me you like holochess. No one here will play holochess with me.”

“That is because you always win,” a lilting voice behind him replied. Ben turned to meet a pair of icy blue eyes staring up at him through long, black eyelashes. Rey had never seen a blue as intense as that girl’s eyes. She had beautiful, thick, chestnut brown hair that flowed freely around her face. Her full lips were cocked in a coy smirk, and Rey immediately felt a pang of jealousy as Ben studied her with intrigue. Her clothes were dark, almost black, and their fit left little to the imagination.
She was classically beautiful and carried herself with an air of refinement and elegance that Rey could never replicate. Even though she exuded poise and class, her eyes warned that she was intense and strong – a Force not to be reckoned with. Deadly. Rey could see why she intrigued Ben.

“My name is Jaina Fel and this is my twin brother... “

“Jacen,” he finished for her, “we’re from Coruscant.” Both have strength in telepathy, as well as Force cloak and Force wound, respectively. Rey wondered what her bondmate’s strongest abilities were, but her best guess after her experiences when they were enemies was Telekinesis and Mind Probing.

Jacen had the same piercing blue eyes as his sister. His hair was a lighter chestnut color and relatively shorter than the other padawans. He was of slighter build than Ben and comparatively shorter, but still muscular. He smiled a genuine, captivating smile, and Rey knew he was someone that she could have easily been friends with. His clothes were lighter than his sister’s, but still dark comparatively. His Force signature shimmered with strong emotions. She knew, somehow, that he was a very passionate and loyal soul.

Another boy stepped forward, with wavy dark brown hair like Ben that swept across his face in the breeze. He had brown eyes with bright gold flecks as well, but his eyes were kind, gentle, not nearly as intense as her bondmate’s. His energy wasn’t strong, but it was warm and bright, like a steady river. “Dev,” he said. “Dev Sibwarra, from Chandrila. Strength in Force Healing and Force Vision. His clothes were light, nearly all white, and Ben seemed interested in the righteousness it portrayed. Everything about the boy screamed “Jedi,” and Ben decided that he wanted to become more like him. Rey remembered from the memory he had shared with her on Ahch-To, that he had, at least in appearance.

A pang of sympathy twisted in Rey’s stomach. Something about the strong, tumultuous conflict that radiated through the bond told her that this boy had been important to Ben. It didn’t require her memory of the flashes in his dreams to know that he did not flee the temple with Ben; the profound ache over the bond was enough.

Fractured memories began to flash before her eyes again. The first was Ben playing a game of Dejarik by saber-light with Rayf in the middle of the night, both taking the game too seriously, but enjoying it nonetheless. Then the memory cut away to him throwing daggers with Corran; the emotions had faded, but she could sense their easy-going friendship anyway. Then she saw a flash of him training against droids with Kyp. When the jagged edge of that memory had passed, she watched him run laps around the temple with Tionne in the early morning hours, companionably debating Jedi beliefs as they pushed each other to go faster. That memory flickered into one of
Dorsk teaching him techniques to control his emotions and him returning the favor by teaching the Khommite different fighting stances. She watched him play Force games with Jaina, bantering with sarcasm and witty retorts.

The last memories were longer, though no less fractured. It was clear he was closest to Jacen and Dev, as they practiced, explored and drank Corellian Whiskey together. Ben smiled often in those memories; she felt the brightness in his energy. He seemed genuinely… happy. He confided in them, trusted them, was closer to them than she had seen him with anyone before, even his family. Dev was the voice of reason and stability, Jacen the voice of playfulness and adventure; together his two closest friends helped provide him balance.

There were even memories of Luke, his affect less serious and pessimistic than she remembered him as he patiently instructed Ben how to manipulate the Force to do things like… lift rocks. Luke laughed, playfully messed up his nephew’s hair, and they talked over long walks around the temple. Luke was patient and mirthful and hopeful; he seemed to be a much greater teacher than he had ever been to Rey. Ben didn’t seem to be falling closer to darkness as he’d been before. The training seemed to be working; he seemed to have found himself. By all outward appearances, he was thriving at the Jedi temple.

Rey didn’t understand. From the very first memory, she was slowly watching the darkness take over, as Snoke was clawing a stronger hold over his thoughts. She had expected the darkness to steadily consume him until it was too late, but it hadn’t. He was the furthest from falling that she’d ever felt him, he’d had a chance. It hurt more than an inevitable fall ever could.

*What happened to you, Ben? You had every reason not to fall. How could one mistake change everything?*

Another memory flashed before her eyes, though Rey surmised, based on his surroundings, that he was at another Jedi temple. She knew several years had passed since the previous memories; she finally recognized the deep voice that had become so familiar over the past few weeks. As if the realization that Ben could have been with Luke wasn’t enough, another startling realization crossed her mind – one that hadn’t occurred to her until she wondered what she had been doing that moment when he was at his brightest.

His voice gave it away. He must have been an adult by that point, or close to it… and he was still with Luke. Rey could feel the light inside him. He had conflict, but it wasn’t because he had killed anyone. She knew that if he had killed her parents, it would have happened under Snoke, but he was the furthest from joining Snoke that she had ever seen him. For Kylo to have killed them, he had to have been a young teenager when it happened. By the time he turned, he would have been too old; they weren’t more than ten years apart.
He couldn’t have killed them.

She had stayed awake with endless questions burning in her mind; questions that didn’t make sense, questions she knew he would never answer. There was something about it that hadn’t made sense, only now could she understand why. He had never lied to her, she knew that even at his darkest the truth was important to him, but he had lied to her about this.

Why would he lie about something that evil? Does he want me to hate him?

They were questions for another time, because his memories continued on without her. Jedi students were practice fighting with their lightsabers in the darkness. She noticed Kyp and Corran, observing the duels from the shadows. Dorsk and Rayf were betting on something a few yards in the other direction. Ben was kneeling next to Dev, Tionne, and Jaina across from them, as they watched Alema and Jacen duel with intrigue.

Rey realized quickly through Ben’s mental calculations that he favored Jacen. He was not as tall as the blue Twi’lek, so he relied on quicker reflexes and agility. His form was still considered Djem So, but there were subtle flourishes of the more controlled but darker form of Makashi. His icy blue eyes were enchanting under the light of his matching lightsaber. Alema had a greater reach, but her specialty seemed to rest with Force manipulation rather than a lightsaber. Rey could sense her vibrating desire to unleash a Force attack, though she knew it was against the rules of the duel.

“She left her weak side open; why didn’t he see it?” Tionne whispered to Ben.

“He did,” Ben whispered back, “But he knew she left it open on purpose; she was baiting him.”

“I would have been baited,” Tionne sighed.

Ben turned to her, his voice gentle with reassurance. “It’s okay, you’ll get there, I’ll teach you.”

Tionne smiled, twirling a red curl around her fingertips. “You’re the best, Ben.”

“You’re the best, Ben,” Jaina mocked breathlessly next to him as she twirled her own hair around her finger and batted her eyelashes dramatically. Tionne stood up in a huff and stormed away, and Ben shoved Jaina with the Force.
“Why do you have to do things like that?”

Jaina groaned, standing up and brushing off her legs. “Because you’re clueless, Ben,” she said, slapping him on the shoulder before sauntering off in the same direction as Tionne. There was something dark and slimy inside Rey that was grateful Jaina had caused Tionne to leave. Something about what he had said to the young woman irritated her. There was no reason for her to feel that way, Rey knew that. He was only being kind to the girl – something she should have been content to see from a man currently hellbent on galactic domination – but his offer irked her.

You need a teacher, his voice echoed in her mind. Rey shook the memory away. Ben’s focus had switched to his best friend, and Rey refused to admit that she was pleased with the development. “I’m not clueless.”

“A little,” Dev said with a soft chuckle.

Ben turned to argue, but he was distracted as he watched his friend stare at the Twi-lek engaged in a practice battle with their friend. It wasn’t necessarily that he was watching her, it was the awe in his eyes as he did. “I’m not clueless about who you’re staring at.”

“Isn’t she beautiful?” Dev said softly as Alema spun her blade gracefully, her leeku swaying with her movements.

It seemed to catch Ben off-guard; that her ferocity and power could be beautiful. He had never physically met anyone who captivated him the way Alema captivated Dev, but he supposed that was exactly what drew his friend to her. “She’s very strong,” he agreed.

Dev blinked rapidly, but didn’t turn to look at Ben, as if he feared that Ben would stop talking if he did. Rey knew the feeling well. “Is that what’s beautiful to you? Power and strength?”

Ben shrugged. “I don’t know. I never thought about it.”

“I know I’ve never seen you give anyone here a second glance, but there’s been someone, right?” Dev looked at him knowingly, as if he believed there was, and Ben feared that he had seen his dreams.
Despite her curiosity, Ben didn’t want to investigate his friend’s assumptions any further. If he was giving his life to the Jedi, it didn’t matter anyway. “I don’t know, I don’t think I’ve known anyone well enough to desire them.”

Dev turned and gave him a perplexed look. “You need to know someone to desire them? Isn’t that love, not attraction?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what love feels like to know the difference,” Ben said, his eyes returning to the duel. Jacen was on the offensive, his quick changes in stance confusing Alema and leading her to falter in her own movements. Ben sensed Dev tense next to him when Jacen’s blade came within centimeters of her face. “But I think you love her.”

“Why do you say that?”

Ben didn’t need to look back to his friend, but he knew if he did, he would see the truth as plain on his face as he’d hear in his voice. “Because you look at her like she’s… home.”

The sound of Alema’s shout quickly drew their attention back to the duel. The identical blue blades whirled through the air. Jacen’s chestnut hair was longer than when he and Ben had first met. It fell across his bright blue eyes as he spun and kicked the Twi-lek onto her back, kneeling over her with his practice lightsaber to her throat. Alema stared up at him, studying him carefully. Blue eyes were locked onto black ones, as blue plasma illuminated their faces. The Twi’lek took this opportunity to swing her own lightsaber up from the ground, striking Jacen in the side. He cried out in surprise, releasing Alema from his hold.

“Smart, Alema!” Dev yelled from his crouched position. “Rule number one, Jacen! Don’t hesitate!”

“The second you trigger that lightsaber, if you don’t kill, you’ll be killed,” Ben added. “If you have the opportunity to end it...end it quickly.” Rey thought back to their fight on Starkiller. He had hesitated at the edge of that cliff. He could have killed her, but he asked to teach her instead. It almost led to his own death. She wanted to know why he had broken his own rule.

“I know. I know,” Jacen admitted, his icy blue eyes glowing in excitement. “I just want my kills to be personal. I want to stare them in the eyes as I take their life. I want to see the life drained from
them.”

Dev snorted. “At least disarm her of her weapon first.”

Ben stood, removing his own weapon from his hip. “Should we be concerned with the ‘morbid pleasure you receive in imagining the consequential act of taking a life?’” Rey could feel his amusement; he was… mocking his uncle, if his thoughts were anything to go by. This version of him was nothing like the man she thought she knew.

A wry smile spread across Jacen’s face. “You sound like Skywalker.”

Jaina stood, her hand on her own weapon, but Rey sensed Ben’s aversion to fighting her. “Last time I checked – my dear, idiot brother – he is a Skywalker and you haven’t killed anyone.” Her words were directed at Jacen, but her eyes never left Ben.

“So... neither have you. And neither has Dev. And neither has he.” Jacen challenged, raising his lightsaber and gesturing toward his friend. “Prepared to fall, Ben?” Her bondmate activated his own weapon in response. The reluctance she had felt in him from the idea of facing Jaina bubbled into thrill as he drew the blade in short arcs and flourishes in preparation to face her brother.

“Hey, I called next,” Dev protested, standing to ready his own lightsaber. The green blade was striking among the other blue.

“Two against one?” Ben shrugged, “I’ll take those odds.” Darkness flooded Rey’s veins as it did Ben’s. He must have known, even then, its power when used for combat. He didn’t give them a chance to agree as he swiftly closed the distance between himself and the other two students. Both were caught off guard, stumbling backward from a swing that intended to separate them. Ben did not doubt his strength in a fight, even then. Perhaps that was why he had been confident that he could face both her and Finn while critically wounded. He would have succeeded, had he not hesitated and just pushed her off the cliff instead.

She could feel the steady emotions flowing through the bond. He was meticulous, calm, confident, and poised. Rey found herself enjoying the feeling of fighting as Ben. Each strike flowed through him as if it had been rehearsed, each attack quick, precise, and perceptive. She wondered if he had been stronger as a Jedi, when the light and darkness had been more in balance… or was it she who weakened him? This wasn’t the Kylo she faced on Starkiller; she didn’t want to face him like this. The strength of his swing knocked Dev off his feet, his friend gasping for air as he landed flat on his back. Ben kicked the weapon from Dev’s hand, then turned and brought the blade down upon his other friend with velocity, singeing Jacen’s clothes.
Jacen cried out in surprise, but Ben did not revel in his victory. He immediately pivoted on his heels, swinging his blade to barely block another blue blade that had attempted to take advantage of his unguarded back. As their lightsabers clashed, he came face to face with a blue-eyed beauty.

“I never agreed to three against one,” he laughed, still winded, his breath coming out in harsh pants. “You’re becoming too predictable, Jaina.” The words were lost on Rey as she realized she had never heard him laugh before. She had never even seen him smile. She had felt it in his memories, but she had never seen it for herself. The deep, rumbling sound of his laughter simultaneously warmed her soul and churned her stomach. She craved to be the reason he laughed, but she feared the boy capable of that laugh was gone.

Jaina seemed to enjoy his laugh as well, smiling coquettishly as she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. The confident and graceful woman accepted defeat and disengaged her lightsaber. Ben hesitantly followed suit. Without the presence of the blades, they stood uncomfortably close.

“Predictable, huh?” Jaina smiled, her eyes flashing seductively. She quickly leaned up and captured his lips with hers. Ben’s brows furrowed in confusion, but his mind went blank. Rey immediately understood why he had become unhinged when she kissed Poe. Her stomach dropped and rolled with nausea, but she refused to admit why a kiss from the past between Ben and that young woman troubled her.

_He just... didn't seem the type to kiss random girls who throw themselves at him_, she decided. _He said so himself._

Rey realized she had never given a thought to exactly who Ben was romantically. She had never given a thought to who she was romantically. On Jakku, she didn't have time for those thoughts, though there had been opportunities presented by the off-worlders, her concerns focused only on survival and her parents' return. After she had joined the Resistance, the war consumed most of her thoughts. One moment her bondmate was her enemy, the next, she thought about kissing him. Though she could acknowledge the attractiveness of her friends, there had only ever been him that she imagined that way.

When he looked at her with those striking eyes, he had made her feel as if she was the only other person in the galaxy. She had never considered how many other women he had made feel like that. She suddenly wondered about his experience with other women, and what type of woman he was attracted to. she wondered if Jaina had ever seen his bare chest as she had, or if he had told Jaina that she would never be alone. She wondered whether his kiss would be as gentle as his hands.

She steeled herself for further emotionally complicated torment, but as his thoughts returned, Ben
jolted in surprise and stepped back from the beautiful woman. His emotions were a mix of shock and an awkward boyishness that made Rey’s heart flutter. Jaina did not look distressed by his rebuff. Instead, she winked and blew him a flirtatious kiss. Jaina didn’t look distressed, but Tionne did.

“Gross, plain-Jain, you don’t know where that’s been,” Jacen teased, breaking the tension. Ben ignited his lightsaber and flipped the training blade at his friend, burning his arm in retaliation for the slight.

Jaina threw her lightsaber at her brother. “Shut up, jerk-cen .”

The lightsaber stopped before it hit Jacen square in the chest, suspended in mid-air. They all turned to see Dev standing behind them, smiling mischievously. He manipulated the weapon slowly into his waiting hand. Jaina called her brother’s weapon, igniting it as she pointed it at Dev. “Let’s see what you’ve got,” she said. “Winner keeps the loser’s lightsaber.” He paused, eyes distant for a moment before he smiled and nodded in agreement. Jaina rolled her eyes, dropping out of her stance. She disengaged the lightsaber and threw it back at her brother, aiming low. She tutted playfully. “Using your visions is cheating, Dev.”

“I’ll challenge you, Jaina,” Tionne said, picking up her own lightsaber.

Jaina smiled wryly, calling her lightsaber from Dev’s hand. “We both know you’ll know lose. You are not cut out for lightsaber combat. Every time you actually hit someone; you apologize.”

“Oh, I know I won’t win,” Tionne replied sweetly, trying to keep a straight face. “I was just giving poor Ben a head start to get away from you.”

Jaina rolled her eyes and shoved the other woman with the Force. Jacen caught the redhead with a Force hold of his own, and Tionne smiled brightly in return. “Thank you, Jacen.”

Jaina narrowed her eyes playfully at her brother, settling into a challenging stance. “Traitor.”

The playful atmosphere was shattered when a student with long, shaggy blond hair and beguiling green eyes approached them. Rey knew his cunning smile meant trouble. “Don’t let Master Skywalker catch you practicing. You know it’s against the rules,” he warned. “And I don’t know why you bother, Jaina, Jacen defeats you every time. Just like Ben always defeats him.”
Jacen smiled, though his eyes were no longer crinkled in amusement. “You can’t become the best if you don’t practice against the best.”

Jaina turned her back on him in irritation, gathering her other personal effects. “Cade, complaining won’t change that you’ll always be a sub-par Jedi.”

“He’s just mad that he could never defeat Ben,” Jacen said, further antagonizing the other student as he clipped his lightsaber on his belt, also preparing to leave. Evidently, they had sensed the student was trouble as easily as Rey had.

Jaina’s eyes were alight with amusement. “Or you,”

“I don’t need to defeat Ben or Jacen; we’re supposed to be on the same side,” Cade argued, “and Master Skywalker said...”

“If you have a problem, Cade, why don’t you go snitch to Master Skywalker like you always do,” Kyp cut in, emerging from the shadows he and Corran had been observing the escalating argument.

“Hey Cade,” Jacen continued to bait him. “I bet Ben could defeat Master Skywalker too. I have seen how fearful he is of Ben’s power. I bet that is the real reason why it’s against the rules to practice.”

“No, Master Skywalker is powerful,” Ben had said it in a teasing tone, but Rey sensed the loyalty he had once held for his uncle under the surface.

“Or, it’s against the rules because Master Skywalker is worried Ben will follow in his grandfather’s footsteps,” Cade scoffed. She felt trepidation in Ben’s emotions. Corran jumped to his feet, anticipating a fight, but the other students stood in shock.

Finally, Jaina stepped forward, grabbing Ben’s arm. “Let’s go.”

“Great idea Jaina, anyone else want to go for a run?” Tionne suggested. The offer itself wasn’t odd – other than the common knowledge that Jaina and Tionne never agreed on anything – but her tone was out of place. Ben immediately felt as if she knew something that he didn’t, something she feared he would discover. When he turned to look at her, he saw the matching fear in her eyes. Rey knew her bondmate well enough to know it only piqued his curiosity.
“What are you suggesting?” Ben hid the confusion in his voice, ripping his arm from Jaina’s grasp so he could face Cade.

Dev, who had remained silent to that point, was seething. “Cade, leave!” Rey felt his unease escalate at his friend’s outburst. Evidently, he had never heard Dev raise his voice in anger before. There was nothing that would have convinced him to let the matter drop after that.

Cade, however, decided to double-down instead of heeding Dev’s demand. “It’s not exactly a secret around here that you’re Darth Vader’s grandson.” As Cade’s words settled in the silence between them all, Rey didn’t sense the anger or fear she had expected, but confusion. Rey realized the truth as he did; they never told him. The cogs were turning in his head, connections were being made, an understanding of why the people he loved had feared him became clear. Still, he refused to believe that his entire life was a lie.

**Why did you never tell him, Leia?**

“My grandfather was Anakin Skywalker, Jedi Knight. Darth Vader killed him,” Ben growled. Dev and Jacen exchanged nervous looks. Rey wondered how Ben had gone so long without discovering the truth. Certainly, there had been signs. Perhaps he had been as deep in denial about his grandfather as she had been about her parents. Perhaps *that* was why he had thought she would turn in the throne room.

A smile grew on Cade’s face as the tension grew thicker between them. “Darth Vader was Anakin Skywalker.”

**Yes... only now can you realize the potential of your bloodline...You can be something truly remarkable... young Skywalker…** the voice in his head whispered.

Ben shook his head, trying to shut the voice out.

**No.**

He turned to Dev, sorrow written on his face, and then to Jacen, regret written on his.
No!

He shut his eyes, breathing deeply as he tried in vain to center himself.

*It’s not possible. For it to be true, everyone in my life would have to be a…*

“Liar!” Ben screamed, turning his practice lightsaber on the other student. A powerful strike to Cade’s side forced the boy to the ground. Ben stood over him as he held the lightsaber to his throat. “Darth Vader was a murderer and a monster! He is everything my family fought against! My grandfather was a *hero*!”

Even then, the pieces continued to snap into place. He had always believed they never talked about Anakin because it was painful to talk about; he thought that was why the comparison hurt them. Had they been comparing him to a *monster* his entire life? His mother acted as if Anakin had never existed at all, as she had with him when he wasn’t good enough. It explained why some of the other students at the temple had begun to avoid him, and why his uncle had begun telling him more stories about his grandfather's background over the past few weeks.

“You didn’t know?” Jacen cautiously approached him. Ben pivoted to read his friend’s eyes. Rey could see the pain hidden there. “We...we thought you knew. Luke has been projecting it in his mind when he’s watched you train lately. We've known for weeks. I figured it would have been a hard secret to keep in your family. And I thought it was something you would talk about eventually over our raids of Skywalker’s Corellian Whiskey, when you actually talked about your family. I didn’t think…”

Jacen looked to their friend for help, but Dev was already stepping forward next to Ben. “I should have just asked you about it. I would have told you... *we* would have told you, so you wouldn’t have found out like this. I’m sorry.” She could hear the regret and concern in his voice, and she could feel the trust in Ben. His anger wasn’t focused on them.

Other than his family, Dev and Jacen were the only other people she had ever seen deeply care for Ben; and she felt the strength of their brotherly bonds through Ben, it was obvious they were close. She knew Ben killed the other students at the temple. She had seen the dreams. *Could he have killed Dev and Jacen?* The thought sickened her.

Logical thought became difficult as her bondmate's emotions spiraled. Ben was reeling. Rey could feel him draw on the Force to keep himself upright, the room spinning around him. The breath was squeezed out of her chest just as it had been for him. The darkness invaded her senses.
They lied! Ben screamed in his mind as he unraveled.

They all lied!

My entire life has been a lie.

People don’t lie to the ones they love, Ben, repeated tormentingly in his mind.

They don’t love me.

Though the thoughts had plagued him since Snoke first began whispering in his head, there was always the hope inside him that actively fought against the words. They had always been Snoke’s words. For the first time, they became his own. No one could ever love me or want me. I’m worthless. I’m nothing I’m a burden. That’s why they lied. And abandoned me here. I’m the grandson of Darth Vader. A monster. Everything I believed...

In an instant, everything he had believed about his grandfather had changed. The man was no longer the heroic Jedi he had believed he was. He hadn’t died trying to save the galaxy from Darth Vader; he had become him. It was impossible for Ben to reconcile the man in the stories his uncle told of his father with that monster. Darth Vader killed his grandmother; that meant Anakin killed his own pregnant wife. His grandfather killed Ben’s namesake; a man who had been his brother in every way but blood. His grandfather killed children. And Ben was just like him. No wonder his family feared him and his darkness. Ben’s stomach churned with the thought. Ben felt the immediate urge to run as far away from everyone he ever loved so he could never hurt them.

Rey could feel his disillusionment toward the man, but there was a loyalty the truth didn’t erase. Ben had been compared to his grandfather – the dark, but heroic Jedi Knight he believed him to be – so often in his life that he had begun to feel a connection, a loyalty, to the man he had never met. He believed the man was someone who would have understood him when no one else could. Though the truth about the man had changed, his loyalty developed by a genetic link could not so easily be destroyed. By not telling Ben about who his grandfather was, his family had unwittingly created his idolization of his grandfather, and, in turn, Darth Vader. Rey knew when he couldn’t inevitably separate the loyalty he had with the man from the monster he had become, it would have been nearly effortless for Snoke to turn that loyalty against the Jedi instead.

It’s all a lie. When they said I was too much like my grandfather... they were talking about Vader the whole time. They were afraid of me becoming a monster... The hollow void left behind by their
lies gave way to fear.

Am I?

Am I the monster they were afraid I’d become?

Am I just like him?

The fear transformed into anger. He was angry at his parents, his uncle, his grandfather, but he was even angrier with the Force. It’s not fair! Ben just wanted to be a pilot and have a real family. He didn't ask to be born. It wasn’t his fault a monster’s blood coursed through his veins. He didn’t want heroic parents. He didn't want the Force, he didn't want to be a Jedi, and he certainly didn’t want to be anything like his evil grandfather. He's evil.

I could never be like him.

But the darkness does call you, Snoke whispered through his mind. You knew you would never be good enough for them. You can fight it, as your grandfather did. But you were never meant to be a Jedi; this is not your part to play. You will fail, and then you will never worthy of your bloodline. Or, you could take the path destined to you. Then you will become more powerful than you could ever imagine.

Maybe Snoke isn't my enemy; maybe I have been denying the truth that is my destiny... the truth that is my family. I have fought so hard to be someone I'm not for people who fear me... hate me. My entire life I thought I was weak because I couldn't control the darkness. I was weak because I have been suppressing my true power. Maybe I was always meant to become like him. Maybe I was always meant to become everything I hate. Maybe Snoke was right, maybe I do belong in darkness. His thoughts may have been dark and focused on inevitability, but his physiological reaction was anything but resolute. He was hyperventilating, his body shaking uncontrollably. She watched his emotions spiral out into the Force, creating a whirlwind of energy around him.

The other students stepped back from him in shock, but Jacen and Dev were caught inside the whirlwind with him. Kyp was the closest outside of the winds to stop him, but he stood frozen in shock, watching the scene unfolding before him, choosing not to intervene other than scream. “What did you do, Cade!”

“Ben, you’re stronger than this,” Corran warned, stepping forward next to Kyp with a level-headed
calm. “Don’t let it control you.” He lifted his hands to brace against the winds, attempting to slow them, but the energy was too strong.

“Somebody, do something!” Alema shouted as the winds whipped around them violently. She did not intervene either, and Rey assumed it was due to fear of injuring Dev in the process.

“Please don’t do this, Ben,” Jaina pleaded helplessly as Jacen stepped closer. Ben held his lightsaber firmly at Cade’s throat, the whirlwind heightening in intensity until they were all using the Force to stay rooted to the ground. Dorsk and Rayf carefully approached the escalating confrontation.

Dorsk held his hands up in preparation to help suppress the Force raging around Ben but hesitated. The empathy on his face made it clear he wanted to give Ben a chance to control it on his own. “You are not your grandfather,” he tried.

Rayf stepped up next to Dorsk, his eyes not showing the fear that the others did. He shrugged. “You can’t help who you’re related to.”

“Skywalker was his son, and no one here thinks any different of him,” Tionne added with an earnest smile. “I don’t think any different of you.”

But I am him, Ben thought. Don’t you see? No matter how much I don’t want to be him, that is all they will ever see in me.

“Ben! Stop!”

Ben turned, but his weapon remained fixed upon the other boy. Luke was standing in the darkness, illuminated by his own green lightsaber. It was held at his side, non-threateningly pointed toward the ground. Rey could feel the fear and anger vibrate through their bond; fear that his uncle had ignited the lightsaber, and anger that he had lied to him as much as his parents did. Rey wondered if those were past emotions or currents ones.

“Is it true?” he demanded, turning the lightsaber toward his uncle. Luke disengaged his weapon in response. “Is my entire life a lie? Am I the grandson of Darth Vader?” Luke didn’t answer; he didn’t need to. She could see the truth in his eyes, and she knew Ben could see it too. There was also regret and understanding in Luke’s eyes. Somehow, she knew he had been against keeping that secret, perhaps because he knew what it felt like to live that lie. It wouldn’t change the outcome,
however, as Ben felt immediately alienated by everyone he had ever loved for keeping the secret from him.

The whispers echoed through her mind again.

Yes... Let the darkness flow through you... Give into it... The darkness will carry away the pain... The darkness gives you power... Your bloodline gives you power... You can be greater even than Vader.

The whirlwind grew to dangerous levels around them as the whispers continued in his head. Luke reached out his hand to manipulate the Force, but his eyes grew wide as he realized that even he did not have the capability to control the darkness surrounding them. It seemed inevitable that there would be a Force explosion.

Then he felt a strong pressure on his shoulder. Ben turned to see an abnormally calm Jacen, hand grasping his shoulder, smiling reassuringly. Dev stepped forward, standing over Cade. He grabbed Ben’s wrist, forcing Ben to disengage the lightsaber. Rey could feel the calming warmth of Dev and Jacen’s light as they helped their friend fight the darkness. Ben immediately accepted their help, leaving Rey to wonder if they had helped him that way before. The whirlwind slowly dissipated into the Force as Ben’s own emotions quieted in his mind.

Jacen and Dev helped him control it, she realized. And Ben... let them. Something horrible must have happened to both of them. They cared too much to let Ben fall. They have to be the key to this.

As a new memory emerged, it became clear to Rey that he was no longer at the temple. Ben was landing what looked to be a light freighter on a dark, barren planet. Rey was more familiar with Galactic Civil War era ships, but it looked to her like a newer version of an Allanar N3 light freighter. Ben seemed comfortable and practiced at the controls, but she could sense his boredom and the underlying irritation that he was trying desperately to suppress in the Force.

After successfully setting the freighter down onto the world’s surface – and running through the menial task of shutting it down – he stepped down the ramp to join the rest of the padawans on the planet’s surface. The terrain was uneven, rippling almost as if it had once been a lake that had turned to stone. Over that was a layer of ash thick enough for the group to leave bootprints. As he joined the others in their semi-circle around their Master, Luke began his introduction.

“This is the site of the Great Scourge of Malachor,” Luke began. “The Sith had constructed a temple under the planet's surface, hiding a superweapon that legends proclaim housed the largest kyber crystal in existence. No one knows the extent of the damage the weapon could inflict upon
the galaxy, but it was rumored to have the capability of destroying entire star systems.”

Ben laughed. “That impossible, Master. This battle happened, what, thousands of years ago? No one has discovered that capability even now. To fire a weapon of that supposed magnitude from a fixed position across the galaxy would require –”

“– an alternative to realspace or hyperspace travel, yes,” Luke finished. He sifted through the debris of the battlefield with his boot until he found a scrap piece of metal. Blowing the remaining ash from its surface, he used the Force to lift it up and levitate it before his students. “When we travel through hyperspace, we travel across the galaxy,” he demonstrated his explanation by reaching up and dragging his finger in a long line lengthwise across the metal surface. “Ben, bend this in half.” Ben manipulated the Force as instructed with practiced ease, the metal bending in on itself, resembling the crest of a sand dune. “What we are talking about, is creating a hole in the realspace continuum, bending time and space, if you will. The discharge of the weapon would be moving through the galaxy, not across it.” He demonstrated by igniting his lightsaber and piercing a hole straight through the sides of the metal crest. “If they were to fire such a weapon, the destruction of star systems on the other side of the galaxy would be nearly instantaneous.”

“But that is a theory, Master,” Ben interjected. “If we don't have the ability to create such a weapon now, how could they have the technology to create it back then?”

“That is why we are here, kid.” A glimmer of excitement bloomed in Luke's eyes. “Many ancient secrets and technologies are lost with the civilizations that created them. The most important part of learning Jedi history is to acquire the collective wisdom of the past, otherwise it could be lost, as this was. A great secret was buried here. We are here to listen, to learn from the past. What we know is this – there was a weapon here, powerful enough that the Jedi initiated an attack on the temple. The Sith defended the temple, and there was a great battle. During the battle, for reasons unknown, the weapon malfunctioned. The misfire instantly killed everyone on the planet. All that was left of both Jedi and Sith were their petrified forms. They remained solidified in their last fighting stances, gradually crumbling to ash over time. The temple is still buried underneath our feet, that weapon is still inside. Can you feel the heaviness of the darkness in the Force here?”

Rey could feel its pull on Ben. There were whispers calling to him in a language she didn't understand, thoughts in his head that both knew were not his own.

*Yes...* Snoke whispered. *Feel the absolute power... Don't fear it...Let it guide you...*

Ben was struggling internally to block it all out, fighting the polarity that conflicted with the Jedi teachings. Ben could also feel his uncle's piercing gaze, watching him for signs of the darkness they all knew he had. He felt trapped – fighting the call of the dark, drowning out Snoke's whispers, and hiding his struggle from Luke. His skin crawled with agitation – too tight, too
confining. Something inside him was clawing at the surface, leaving him with the overwhelming desire to destroy. He considered climbing back on the shuttle and setting coordinates for an uncharted planet across the galaxy, where he could be free from all of it. The hair on the back of his neck prickled as he continued to feel studious eyes focused on him. Ben finally met Luke’s stare, challenging him, before shame washed over him and he looked down at his feet instead.

“We will try to find a way into that temple, together,” Luke continued slowly, breaking his scrutiny of Ben with reluctance. “It will require both mental acuity and strength in the Force to pass the trials set forth by the Sith. This will be a team-building exercise, requiring all of you to work together to gain access to the inner rooms of the temple. If you succeed, we could discover the secret to a long-forgotten Sith superweapon. Everyone grab your packs; let’s head inside the main atrium before we head down to the first protected door. Everyone stick together, because there are many false passageways.

Ben was nervous as he drew closer to the temple. The darkness was nearly suffocating in its density, and he knew it would only become more powerful. This was what he needed, however, to prove to himself that he was better than his grandfather. He could fight the darkness and win. Walking through the door and down into the darkness of the main atrium, it immediately became cold in an unnatural way that made his bones ache. The air around them was heavy with moisture and smelled of mold and decay. The Force tingled down his skin, more concentrated there than he had ever felt it.

They ignited their lightsabers to use as the only light source in the darkness. Ben studied the stone walls that had been overgrown with vines. It was the only vegetation he had seen on the planet. There were carving in the walls, something he assumed was Sith. He followed the other students further into the atrium. Dev and Alema used their lightsabers to read the inscriptions on the walls. Kyp, Tionne and Corran practiced their forms, pretending their opponents were the vines hanging from the ceiling. Clighal, Dal, Dorsk and Rayf pushed against the stones that made up the walls, laughing about "secret passageways." The others examined the relics and debris scattering the floor or standing in the center, awaiting Luke.

Ben moved to explore the entrances to the different antechambers attached to the atrium when he heard a cry and splash from a small, dark corridor to his left. Without a word or consideration for his own safety, Ben took off down the corridor, fearful that one of his fellow students had fallen into an underground pool of water. Knowing that some of them were not proficient swimmers, he feared for the other student’s life. Rey felt his loyalty; she understood that, no matter his disagreements with them, he would have given his own life to save any of theirs, even Cade. Ben stopped, panting, at the entrance of a small room. There was no pool of water, only stone and a wall that was frosted with what looked like ice. He turned, believing he had run down the wrong corridor, when he heard the whisper.

*Let me see them…* It was a woman’s voice, echoing around him in the small space. The voice sounded… familiar. Rey thought it sounded like *her* voice.

…please…

Ben turned in search of the voice. He stopped short when he realized the frosted wall was not a wall at all, because he could see a shadow on the opposite side. Was it one of the other students?

“Hello?”

The Force around him called him, a magnetism inside him drew him to the wall. Somehow, he knew it wanted to show him something. He found he wanted it to show him. Under closer inspection, the "wall" looked like ice or glass that had frosted over. As he reached the shadow, it raised its hand to the glass. He stepped closer in curiosity, wondering if it expected him to mirror its movement. “Show me,” he whispered, his voice echoing in the emptiness around him. He didn’t know what he wanted to be shown, but he knew this was what he was there for.

“Show me my destiny.”

Rey understood why he had asked it, even if he had been surprised by his own words. She remembered facing another cave; speaking a similar question, not knowing why she had asked it, but craving the answer all the same. The difference was hers had been a question of the past, but Ben’s had been a question of the future. He touched the mirror, reflecting the position of the shadow on the other side. The frost began to fade in a way all too familiar to Rey. She had expected answers, but the Force hadn’t given them to her. Her own face had been her only answer. Ben would soon learn the same.

Only, that wasn’t what happened to him. When the mirror cleared as it had for her, it was not his reflection looking back at him. As it changed, the shadow on the other side almost looked like her silhouette. But then it transformed into a terrifying sight. She had never seen him before, but she knew by the dark regalia, the heavy breathing, the mask, exactly who it was staring back at them.

Darth Vader.

Ben had been given exactly what he’d asked for. He startled, pulling his hand from the mirror. The
image did not disappear, however. Instead, the man’s labored, mechanical breaths echoed around Ben as the Sith’s hand left the mirror and reached for the mask.

Ben stood frozen as a pneumatic hiss filled the room. The image of Darth Vader removed the helmet, and Rey gasped along with Ben. It was her bondmate, Kylo Ren, complete with the scar bisecting his face, staring back at them. Had his fall always been his destiny?

“No!” Ben staggered backward, tripping and falling to the floor in his panic. The image faded, but the consequences did not.

Yes, the voice whispered in his head. *This is your true potential… You can become greater than Darth Vader. Join me. Fulfill your destiny.*

“No!” Ben cried again, scrambling from the floor and sprinting down the corridor. He stopped short when he nearly collided with a shadow that blocked the archway to the atrium. Ben raised the lightsaber to defend himself, but his entire arm was paralyzed with the Force.

“Whoa there, kid.” He recognized that voice. It was his uncle. “I told you to stay with the group; there are false…” he stopped, finally recognizing the turmoil in Ben. “Are you all right?”

Ben lowered his lightsaber, still shaking in fright. “I saw… I saw something in there,” he answered. “I think it was a vision.”

Luke looked past him down the corridor. When his eyes returned to study Ben’s, there was something grim in them. “What did you see?”

Ben knew he should tell Luke the truth. He was a Jedi Master; he could have helped him meditate on it and find an explanation for what he saw. But a larger part of him wondered if it would make Luke afraid of him, too. In the moment, the truth failed him. “Darth Vader,” he said. He refused to give life to the rest.

*It was me. I was my grandfather. I was Darth Vader.*

Luke turned back to the others in the main atrium. “No more exploring; everyone wait for me by that wall,” he said, pointing with his lightsaber to a vine-covered wall on the far side as removed from the antechambers as possible. He clasped a hand on Ben’s shoulder reassuringly, but his
nephew startled, “Hey, kid, let’s get some air.”

Ben nodded. As he walked past the others, his eyes met Tionne’s, and she stared at him knowingly. It terrified him. Are you okay? she mouthed. Ben stormed past her without answering. He couldn’t answer. He wasn’t okay. He followed Luke out of the temple, trying everything in his power to fight the darkness that overwhelmed him in his fear. It physically hurt to fight against it.

Give in, the voices told him, it’s easy.

Ben tried to practice the steps Luke had taught him. He retrieved the memories that made him happy: reading, flying, Dev and Jacen, the girl in his dreams, the hope of becoming a Jedi. But in the darkness, his thoughts were twisted. He tried to think of reading, then remembered the times he spent up late into the early hours of the morning, reading, as he waited for his mother to come back. He tried to think of flying, but he remembered his father flying away. He tried to think of the girl, then remembered that she had disappeared years before, abandoning him as everyone else did. He tried to think of Dev and Jacen, but feared that they would abandon him, too, if they knew what he saw. He thought of his hope in becoming a Jedi, but all he could see was the mask of Darth Vader sliding away to reveal his face.

Rey could feel the conflict in him. He was falling apart but pretending that he was fine. Ben shut his eyes, but all he could see was the vision. When he reopened them, the concern in Luke’s eyes was staring back at him. There was something else in them – something he never thought he would see in his uncle, but something he had seen in his mother and his father’s eyes. Luke was staring at him as though he was his grandfather. It only fed the uncertainty building inside him. “Let’s go talk in the shuttle,” Luke suggested.

Ben knew how it would go. His uncle would speak to him like a child, asking him questions about how he was doing while tip-toeing around the real questions he wanted to ask. Luke hadn’t been teaching him how to use his power or control it, only suppress it, only to find “peace.” What if he couldn’t find peace? What if the vision was true? What if the darkness was stronger inside him? What if he was becoming his grandfather? All he knew was, Luke was staring at him as if he believed that at any moment, Ben could pick up a lightsaber and kill every last one of them. Still, Ben followed his uncle obediently into the shuttle.

“What’s there to talk about? I’m fine.” Ben said, doing his best to hold strong against the darkness.

“Ben, I...” Luke sighed, hesitating, clearly conflicted with what he was considering. “I think I made a mistake, bringing you here.”
Rey knew Ben struggled on Malachor; she knew he could feel it as well, and that was why she didn’t understand his extreme reaction. She didn’t understand the fear, the hopelessness, the *betrayal* he felt at those words. Then she realized that, while Ben had been thriving by all outward appearances, his internal struggle was still very much alive. There had been a dread that had been building inside him since his parents had left him at the temple; a permanent shadow over everything he did, over every *failure*, reminding him that this was his last chance. The life he had built, the sacrifices he had made, his plans for the future came crashing down upon him under the weight of his uncle’s doubt. This meant more to him than a temple on Malachor. “What… what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I can feel the darkness in this place, and it’s too great a risk. I need you to stay behind for this mission.”

Ben’s stomach churned in sickening realization; as long as tainted blood flowed through his veins, he would never escape the evil of his grandfather. Not even by the man’s own son. “Why?”

“You’re not ready,” Luke said softly but firmly. He winced when he said it, clearly believing he knew how it would affect his nephew. He had no idea. There was uncertainty in his eyes, but his voice was unyielding.

*No, not you, too. Please don't give up on me, Uncle. You’re my last hope.*

Ben’s voice broke as the fears that had stalked him like a shadow – every single moment since his parents left him with Luke as a last resort – were realized. “Is it because of the vision?”

“No.”

Ben tried to contain the betrayal simmering beneath the surface. He knew he should stop challenging Luke; it would only get worse if he lost control, but he couldn't pretend that he wasn’t falling apart on the inside. “Is it because of my grandfather, Uncle?”

“No.”

His uncle's words ignited the wick to Ben's rage. A cold darkness twisted through him. This time he didn't fight it as it found him in his anger. When he spoke again, there was a cutting edge to his voice that was achingly familiar to Rey. “Is it because of my darkness? Because I feel yours, too, *Master*. Even now. The same blood flows through my veins as in yours. Do you fear me, or do
you fear yourself?"

“Don't be difficult, Ben!” Luke's typical patient demeanor faded as his own anger grew. “This place... it clouds your thoughts with darkness; it calls to the darkness in everyone. I felt its effects on all the other students. But the difference is, they immediately searched for the light in their fear. You went straight to the dark. It’s my fault; blame me. I failed you by letting you go in that temple. But you had a vision in there, and I felt what it did to you. What you found in there, you brought with you, do you understand? I want you to stay here and think about what you brought to that room. What did you feel? Was it patience? Calm? Compassion? Mercy? Hope?” He paused, watching his nephew's reaction. Ben hated it.

What do you see in me?

“What did you feel in there, Uncle?” Ben intoned spitefully. “Because, I swear, I sensed fear in you, and fear is a path...”

“All right kid, point taken, but I'm the Master, and you are the student. So trust me. It's just a precaution. I have no idea what that temple holds. If it had this effect on you in less than ten minutes, I don't want to risk putting you back inside, especially when we haven't found a solution to your... outbursts. It's for your own safety.”

“For my safety, Uncle?” Ben said resentfully. “Or yours?”

Luke leveled him a pointed look. “Don't fight this, Ben. You think you're ready, but you're not. I know you want to do this, but it won't turn out the way you think. Trust me. Have patience. There will be other temples.”

“You would leave me here when you know I could help you get into that temple?” Ben was angry. No, he was livid. You ask me to trust you after you all lied to me, but you won't trust me! What have I done? Or is it even me? Am I being punished for your father's sins? She could sense the darkness sinking in deeper with every thought. “Give me a chance! I won't fail! I'm not afraid!”

“You should be, Ben,” Luke warned. “You don't understand the power of the dark side like I do. Stay here and trust in your fellow padawans to find a way into that temple.”

Ben would not give up without a fight. He was pleading with his uncle to not give up on him, too. “I'm stronger in the Force than all of them! You'll fail without me! Let me prove to you that I can
do this!”

Rey could hear the chaotic thoughts tumbling through his mind; there was no reasoning with him. Ben was focused on one absolute – either Luke would trust him, or he wouldn't. And if Luke didn't trust him, then he was hopeless. Every choice made by his parents and his uncle flashed through his mind. Rey knew that it was the final betrayal that caused Ben to turn, but this... Luke was losing him because he didn’t see the significance it carried with Ben.

“No, I'm sorry. Not this one,” Luke said. There was a finality to his tone that matched the finality in Ben’s heart. Rey could see it in his eyes. Luke was beginning to understand that this meant more to his nephew than he had thought; if only he had known how much. “We'll only be gone a few days. Keep your comlink on you, but if you want to take the shuttle, go wherever you want to go. Go home and visit your parents. Or have some fun on your own. I... trust you. Think of it as some free time.” Luke smiled, attempting to add levity to the situation, though his eyes still searched Ben's in concern.

“Just don't tell your mother, kid.”

Ben considered the offer. If Luke would leave him behind here, then it would only grow worse as his own power grew; he knew he could never be a Jedi. Luke felt his power, he feared it. The second Luke uttered the words, Ben knew Luke would never trust him. He could take the shuttle, fly off to that uncharted planet, be free. Rey could feel his loyalty to his uncle and the others, the last tendril holding him to them. He couldn't abandon them, not how – he believed – his parents abandoned him.

Anguish dripped from every word as he gave one last effort to make Luke see that giving up hope in Ben’s ability to handle the mission was giving up hope in Ben. “I've given everything I have to you,” he breathed, “to the Jedi.”

“It's not enough this time, Ben,” Luke said gently.

Will it ever be enough? Will I ever be enough? You don’t trust me! Because you see me as a monster, I will never be a Jedi. All I'll ever be to you is Darth Vader.

Power never lies... Snoke's voice whispered. Power never leaves...You can be so much more than your uncle's unappreciated student...They called you a monster, just like your grandfather...They abandoned you... They lied... They will betray you... This was always your path... Vow allegiance to a master who can show them your true potential... I can make you more powerful than Vader... Come to me... I can show you how powerful you can be. She felt his resolve to fight
the voice dwindling. Ben’s thoughts were heavy with darkness.

What if I was wrong? What if my whole life, he was actually the only one telling me the truth? What if he is the only one who can help me find who I am truly meant to be? What if my true destiny is a path of darkness? What if I was meant to become even greater than Vader? The darkness calls to me here. And for once in my life, it feels right. Rey grew more frustrated as she watched his memories. Ben Solo was slowly becoming Kylo Ren before her eyes.

He shuddered as fingers followed his spine up his back while he hunched over in the pilot's chair. “Hey,” a soothing, feminine voice whispered. For once, the sound of Jaina's voice didn't ignite something feral and possessive deep within Rey. She knew his fall was all too near, remembered what it felt like to fail and be failed by Luke, and was thankful that there was a fleeting moment when he didn't suffer alone, just as he had ensured that she hadn't.

Ben sat up and turned. Jaina stood by his shoulder, beside her stood Dev and Jacen, and behind them, Kyp and Tionne leaned against the entryway. “If you don't go, we don't go,” Jacen said with a smile.

“What about Luke and the others?” Ben asked, his voice strained as he bit back tears.

Dev shrugged as he dropped into the seat next to him. “He’s ‘disappointed’ in us.”

“That’s just because he knows they’ll fail,” Tionne giggled.

Corran strolled into the room swinging a generic bottle of fire-water. “Let ’em fail,” his eyes twinkled with mischief. “Who wants to play a game?”

Rey could feel the warmth of Ben’s smile.

The memory faded into another. They were at the Jedi temple again. It was apparent from Ben’s thoughts that there had been more unintended consequences of Luke’s decision on Malachor. The group that had gone into the ruins, and failed and were resentful toward the others who had chosen to stay with Ben. Those who had stayed with Ben were resentful that the others had gone into the ruins instead of supporting him in unity. The feud was strongest between Cade and Jacen. Dev, Tionne, Dorsk, and even Ben had tried to mediate between the two groups, but even after a long sit down with Luke, there was still a strain between the two sides. That was how Ben found himself sitting around a small fire with his fellow students, waiting for Luke.
They sat in a semi-circle; Cade was was at the top left, followed by Clighal, Dal, Dorsk, Rayf, and Tionne. At the lowest point of the half-circle were Alema and Dev. Then Kyp, Corran, Ben, Jaina, and Jacen made up the right side of the circle. Jaina was playing with the hair that curled at the nap of Ben’s neck as she stared at Tionne. Ben’s focus, however, was on Jacen, whose glare was focused directly across the fire on Cade. Everyone was silent, the tension between them all palpable.

A shadow in a hooded cloak approached the fire, and Ben’s attention snapped to the figure. Entering the ring of light from the fire, Luke removed his hood. A mischievous smile was on his face. “Ten years ago tomorrow – or was it fourteen – my nephew Ben was born.”

Ben rolled his eyes at his uncle’s attempt at a joke. “Hilarious.”

“You’re the biggest fourteen-year-old I’ve ever seen, Ben,” Jacen said. Clighal and Dorsk snorted, and Jacen raised his palms in submission. “Sorry, biggest human fourteen-year-old” He cackled as Ben shoved him with the Force.

“Oh, be a good a sport, kid, or the next time we’re in a cantina, I’ll convince them you’re a decade younger with a mild Force suggestion.”

“You wouldn’t,” Ben said, and Rey knew he was smiling. “That’s abuse of the Force.”

Luke shrugged with a carefree chuckle. He shifted his weight to access his pack and removed a large bottle of Corellian Whiskey along with collapsible cups. “Since you have a habit of stealing mine,” he gave Ben an accusatory side-eyed glance, “I thought we could celebrate with this.”

He began pouring the liquid into the cups and passing them around the circle. It was obvious from the shocked glances exchanged between the students that this was something out of the ordinary for Luke. He raised his cup to Ben, and the others followed suit. Ben swallowed the burning liquid, and something like hope sparked in the darkness. Rey’s heart clenched. Luke had made mistakes – he was human – but he had tried desperately to do right by them.

After several refills, the entire group had loosened up remarkably. The division between the two sides disappeared, and Rey watched the tension in Luke’s shoulders dissolve. Ben was more relaxed than she had ever felt him; she was certain he had a permanent smile fixed on his face. At one point, Jaina had graduated to more audacious touching and began petting his hair, so Jacen and
Dev sat sentry on either side of him to block her. The three friends splintered off from the main group, entertaining themselves by telling stories and reminiscing over old memories. Ben was… happy, and singing, and laughing until his eyes watered. The conflict inside him was forgotten. It was beautiful; he was at peace. It was the only happy memory she had witnessed that hadn’t fractured. What was different about this one that he allowed it to remain intact?

When the fire dwindled, the students made their way back to their own huts. Their laughter cut through the silence of the early morning hours. Ben went to make his leave, giving Dev and Alema time alone with the dying embers, and Luke took it as his own cue to retire for the night. He walked Ben back to his hut, teasing him by disheveling his hair. It was painful for Rey to see how affectionate and hopeful Luke had once been. Outside Ben’s hut, Luke’s energy became more serious as he gripped his nephew’s shoulder. “Your energy seemed… different, tonight. A good different. I’ve planned a quest to more Sith ruins. Are you up for it? We’ll need your help.”

Ben nodded. Rey knew it was everything he wanted to hear from his uncle. For one brief moment, she forgot how it ended, and she believed with Ben that everything would be okay. Unfortunately, the mention of the temple had unintended consequences. The image of his own face behind Vader’s mask flashed through his mind, and his fear spiked. In his inebriated state, Ben panicked further when he realized that his mental barriers weren’t as strong as they should have been. It was only a flash, but if he grew suspicious, Luke could easily search Ben’s mind.

The crash of thunder brought his eyes to the sky. The sound of it caused an ominous chill to coil down his spine. He shuddered. His attention was drawn to his uncle in fear of what he had seen, but Luke was focused on the clouds as they opened up above them. As rain began to tap against the huts, he patted Ben on the shoulder. “Get inside; we don’t want to catch our deaths out here.”

Luke turned away. In his insecurity, Ben called after him, “Good night, Master!”

Luke hesitated for a moment, then replied, “Good night, kid.” Ben watched his uncle’s retreating back, trepidation crawling under his skin. Had he seen it? Ben knew he couldn’t chance it, he had to tell Luke the truth.

_In the morning, he decided. I’ll tell him the truth in the morning._

Something told Rey that Ben would never have the chance to tell his uncle, but after the happiness shared between them all that night, Rey had never expected what occurred a few hours later. Though she hadn’t expected it, the next memory was gut-wrenchingly familiar. Ben opened his eyes to a flash of light and a steady hum that signaled danger. When he turned, he found Luke’s green lightsaber poised to strike him down. He believed it to be a nightmare at first; though Ben had feared his uncle would give up on him as his parents had, the thought that Luke would attempt to murder him in his sleep had never crossed his mind. Rey saw the fear and shame in Luke’s eyes
– he never intended to hurt his nephew – but she felt the terror and anguish in Ben.

_Not you, too._

He summoned and ignited his own blue lightsaber to block the inevitable fatal strike, but he knew that his tuned-down training saber stood no chance to defend him against his uncle’s deadly one. He begged the Force... anyone... to save him from his uncle’s wrath, but no one helped him. Not even the Force found him worth saving.

_I warned you... You are nothing to them... They all abandoned you... They lied to you... They betrayed you... They tried to kill you... But you’re strong..._

Ben may have never found control over his own life, but he would control how it ended. In desperation, he used the Force to crush the hut inward upon them, risking being impaled by either lightsaber in favor of dying on his terms.

He awoke with his lungs screaming for air. Rey’s fingers burned as Ben clawed his way out of the debris of the hut. He was sobbing in a combination of fear and betrayal as he took stock of the situation. Her mind reeled with his. His parents feared him to be a monster; they had believed that Luke was his last hope. But even Luke had lost hope in him, had given up on helping save him from the darkness, enough to attempt to end the life of his own nephew. What did that make him? Every last choice in his life had led him to this moment, and it all came back to his grandfather. And the darkness within him.

What now? Where would he go? What would he do? His life as he knew it ended when that hut crashed in upon them. He knew he couldn’t go back. She heard the whispers and knew this time he’d listen.

_Luke is dead... And you killed him... What do you think will happen now... You have become the monster they feared... They will not believe you... They will kill you for your role in the death of the Jedi Master... There is nothing left to go back to... Let go and free yourself to the dark side... The darkness can eliminate this pain... Power never lies... Power never leaves... Power never betrays you... Power never tries to kill you... You can be someone worth their fears... You can be greater than your grandfather..._ Ben dropped to his knees, defeated. She breathed his doubt, loneliness, and hopelessness as he finally surrendered.

_Ben, I know it’s too late_. Rey whispered as he collapsed. _This happened years before we even met. But it’s not fair, I wish I could turn back time. Because that is the only way to bring the old Ben_
Solo back, isn’t it? I wish I could have helped you before it was too late, before you made choices you could never take back.

She had wondered how he could have turned his back on people that loved him, but she was beginning to understand. They had failed to help him, and because of their mistakes, he truly believed they didn’t love him. Her family had failed her, and she couldn’t let them go, because she still loved them. Ben Solo was no different. He didn’t hate his family. No, even after their failures, he still loved them. That was why he couldn’t let go, either. He had turned his back on them, because he believed they had turned their back on him.

The intense, bright light she had felt radiating inside him was extinguished like a flame. She could feel the strength and power of the darkness as he did. He surrendered to its intensity. The agony from the betrayal by everyone he had ever loved disappeared as the darkness dug its talons into him, numbed him, consumed him. He stood. Emotionless. Determined. Resolute.

You must end the Jedi Order... Join me and I will help you become stronger than you could ever imagine... I can bring you peace...

He's right. I have to end the Jedi Order, Ben realized. Everything Luke taught me was a lie. The righteousness of the Jedi is a lie. They are no different than the Sith; they would kill for as self-serving reasons as their enemies. I have sworn to eliminate the evil from the galaxy, and the Jedi are the worst of them all. They must be stopped. I'll burn it down. I'll burn it all down.

He decided to start with the temple.

How do we get off this place before they find us? The only ships Luke had were a shuttle and an old x-wing. The shuttle could carry all of them, but it was short range. He didn’t know where they would go, if they would meet Snoke, or just run away to the Wilds, but they had to leave. There was nothing left for them there. Ben wondered if any of the others would come with him. What else would they do? The Order had betrayed them, Luke had failed them – all of them. If we try for the light freighter Luke left at the spaceport on Torque, without Luke, we’ll have to steal it and risk detainment. We need a ship. I have no one. No one to raise on Luke’s personal comms to escape this place. No one except...

“Ben?” a voice he hadn’t heard in years answered after being fetched by the droid who had answered his plea. It was the middle of the night cycle there, and Ben knew he had likely been asleep.

“I’m in trouble,” he gasped out, his lungs still burning from the rubble. “I need a ship, but I can’t
Rey could feel the fear; Ben expected questions that he wasn’t prepared to answer. He expected hesitation, or refusal, of what he believed to be his only chance to be saved. He hadn’t expected an immediate response. “All right. Where are you?” Ben gave him the coordinates, the odd detachment in his voice belied by bouts of vomiting. He staggered from the concentration of darkness and the consequences of the night’s events, body shaking as the adrenaline wore off. His thundering heart wouldn’t slow no matter how much he searched for calm in the Force. There was nothing but darkness in his fear, so he grasped tight to the darkness.

“You’re lucky I’m on Coruscant for business, kid,” came the reply. “I’m on my way.”

Rain began to fall again as he set fire to the temple. He strengthened and spread the flames with the Force, making the fire impervious to nature’s efforts to stop him from destroying it all. As cold droplets fell from the sky, he stood out in the open, watching the inferno with pride as he had once as a child on a lonely birthday. The light cast by the growing flames drew the other students from their huts. Dev was the first one out. “Fire!” his friend shouted to the others, before sprinting toward the temple to fight the flames.

Dev noticed Ben standing in his path as he approached, and his friend grabbed his arm as he ran by. “Ben, let’s go! Fire at the temple!” Ben refused to move from the spot. Dev must have noticed a change in his energy, the darkness surrounding him, or saw a splinter of the future, because he froze in his tracks.

“Ben?”

It was a plea.

“I know,” he told his friend. “I did this.”

The man who had become Ben’s family slowly turned to face him. When their eyes met, he stared at Ben with a grim resignation, as if it was something he had feared all along. Perhaps they all had. It reopened the wound in Ben’s bleeding heart. As Ben saw it, even Dev had given up on him. “Ben, listen to me, don’t do this,” his friend begged.

Ben couldn’t stand seeing the disappointment in Dev’s eyes any longer, so he turned to the others who were gathering outside their huts. “Luke Skywalker is dead,” he announced bitterly over the
rain. “My own uncle tried to kill me in my sleep. If he feared my power, he would have feared yours as well. The Jedi Order has failed us. We must destroy it all and leave this place for good.”

“Ben, what did you do?” Tionne whispered. It was evident by the sudden tightness in his throat that he hadn’t expected to see the mortification in her tearing eyes. *They’re turning against me, like him.* The other students reacted in fear and anger. Rey could see that they divided very quickly. Some blamed Luke, and others blamed Ben.

“He killed Master Skywalker! We can’t trust him!” Clighal exclaimed, backing away from Ben in fear.

Kyp was quick to come to Ben’s defense. “Did you not hear the part about Skywalker trying to kill him?” There was a ferocity behind his words that caused the Mon Calamari to shrink away even further.

“What would you have done, if your master was trying to kill you?” Corran added. He was leaning against his hut, whittling something with a vibroblade that glistened in the starlight, his voice disinterested as if they were discussing politics, not the death of their master.

“How do you know he was trying to kill you?” Alema stepped forward, hand grasping her lightsaber. “This is Master Skywalker we’re talking about!”

Tionne stood by her side, holding her back. “Alema don’t,” she begged. “Let’s just talk about this, okay?”

Ben glared at Alema in contempt. “I woke up to the sound of him triggering his lightsaber. I blocked his strike with pure luck and instinct. If I did not collapse the hut, he would have killed me.”

“He’s telling the truth, I can sense it,” Dorsk said to the group, stepping between the two sides. “I can see his mind.”

Dal’s hand was at his hip, resting on his lightsaber, prepared to fight a man twice his size. “Why would Master Skywalker want to kill you?”

Rayf joined Dorsk between the two groups. “You’ve seen Ben’s power.” He reasoned, assisting
Dorsk in an attempt to deescalate the emotions heightening on both sides. “Skywalker feared him. And you all know what the Jedi teachings claim about fear.”

Alema wanted nothing to do with their attempts to pacify the others. She unclipped her lightsaber from her belt. “Luke didn’t even kill Vader. You expect us to believe that he would kill his own nephew, his student, a Jedi, while he slept?”

Dev stepped toward the Twi-lek with his hands raised, attempting his own rationalization. “Alema, Skywalker had no logical reason to be in Ben’s hut in the middle of the night. If he wasn’t attempting to kill Ben, what was he doing there?”

“Oh, only two people know the answer to that, our fallen master and the man who killed him,” Dal spat back.

Ben felt betrayed again. Not only had his master attempted to kill him, but some of the others didn’t believe him. No one will ever believe me. His words were sharp with malice. “You are either with Skywalker... or me. Make your choice.”

One of the students drew his weapon. Rey recognized the shaggy blonde hair. It was Cade. He twisted the tuning knob on the hilt of his training lightsaber to high. It was now effectively a deadly weapon. He activated it. “How do we know you’re telling the truth? You’re Darth Vader’s grandson!”

Jacen stepped forward, blocking Cade’s advancement toward Ben.

“Why would Ben lie?” Jaina’s voice was low and feral, protective. She was weaponless, but she joined her brother between Ben and Cade, hands raised to defend her friend.

Cade moved around them, attempting to find an opening. “Why wouldn’t he lie?”

“You saw the way Skywalker looked at him!” Dev shouted, joining Jacen and Jaina in blocking Ben from Cade.

“Maybe there’s a reason for that!” Cade screamed back hysterically, pointing his lightsaber between the siblings at Ben. Jacen twisted the tuning knob on his own lightsaber and triggered it.
“Back up!” Jacen clashed his lightsaber against the other blade. Cade stepped back and took a swing at him. Jacen returned with a strike of his own, and the duel began.

“Jacen, don’t!” Dev shouted, trying in vain to drag him back with the Force, but he easily broke through the hold.

Jaina realized her brother was beyond reasoning with, turned on her heels, and sprinted back to her hut to find her own lightsaber.

“Stop!” Ben demanded, but Cade and Jacen’s tempers had escalated past the point of backing down. The others stood in silence, watching the events unfold before them. She felt his darkness devour the fear. He was all too aware of the consequences of this fight; so was she.

Rey knew Ben felt betrayed by his uncle, but it had never made sense to her why he had killed the others, especially not after she knew young Ben through his memories. Knowing what inevitably happened that night, Rey had a terrible feeling about how the fight would end. She could imagine Jacen falling to Cade’s blade. She could imagine Ben’s reaction, what he would have done in revenge. But she also knew, for Ben to become the man he was now, he had to lose both Jacen and Dev. Dev defended Ben, but he did not share his disdain for the Jedi; he had been disappointed in Ben that he burned down the temple. He wouldn’t join the Knights, she was certain.

She remembered Luke’s words. *He had vanished with a handful of my students… and slaughtered the rest.*

If Dev didn’t join him…

Then Ben killed him.

*He killed one of the two people he loved most in the world. Maybe the light in him really is gone.*

Rey was numb as she watched Ben retune his own lightsaber and activate it. He circled the fight slowly. Jacen stumbled, and Cade slashed his weapon centimeters from his chest. In his effort to dodge the blade, Jacen tumbled backward, falling onto the muddy ground. It was enough to give his opponent an advantage. Cade moved in to finish him. The fury and terror burning through Ben
overwhelmed her. Part of her wanted to look away; part of her wanted to jump into the fray and stop it all. It wasn’t fair that nothing she did would stop what happened next.

“Jacen!” Jaina screamed from the darkness, but they all knew she was too far away to help him.

Ben edged closer to the fight when Cade turned his head to judge her distance. It was enough distraction for Jacen to jump to his feet. When Cade reversed his grip on his weapon, threatening to thrust the blade through Jacen’s chest, Ben stepped up behind him. He could easily run him through with the lightsaber, but he hesitated to take a life. He tried to rationalize with him instead. “Cade!”

In the pouring rain, he barely registered when Dev stepped between them, hands up in an appeal to end the fighting. Dev’s plea died on his lips as Cade’s blade swung around at Ben. Her bondmate was not in close enough proximity to be injured by the weapon, but Dev was. The blade slashed across his chest. The wounds it left behind were deep. Rey knew, without a doubt, they were fatal.

*Ben didn’t kill Dev, she realized, Cade did.*

Ben caught his friend as he crumpled to the ground. “What have you done!” Rey could feel the darkness roaring inside him as he stared at Cade with pure, unbridled hatred.

Cade dropped his lightsaber, backing away frantically. “I… I didn’t know he was there!”

Ben turned back to his friend in his arms, resting him gently onto the muddy ground. “Why did you do that?” he murmured in a softness that was inconsistent with the severity of the situation. “I could have taken him!”

“I know,” Dev choked, his words rasping through wheezing breaths. He grasped tightly to Ben’s tunic. “But I had to try.” Ben shrugged off his outer robe and laid it over his shivering friend. The once white material was dirty from the rubble and wet from the rain, but it was better than nothing. “I see the path before you, Ben. Don’t choose this way; it’s not too late.”

Ben ignored the plea, not for the last time. “Why didn’t you see this?”

Dev had visions of the future; he should have foreseen it. Perhaps he had been careless, or perhaps he *had* foreseen it. His sacrifice could have been made in an attempt to spare one of the others from
that fate, or perhaps he had foreseen exactly how it would end and made the decision to intervene anyway. Perhaps he knew the outcome and thought he could save Ben in more ways than one. Perhaps Dev loved him enough to give his life in hope of saving him. Rey couldn’t foresee the future, but she knew what would happen. If Dev sacrificed himself, it wouldn’t save him. Ben would fall.

Dev’s body began shuddering violently from shock; blood trickled from his mouth and nose. Rey had seen it enough to know what it meant, but she realized through his naïve thoughts that Ben had never seen anyone die before. It deepened the sorrow churning inside her to feel his blind hope that his friend could be saved. She knew it would make the inevitable outcome that much worse. Tears blurred his vision, his breaths were panicked, his hands shook violently as he attempted to help his friend.

Jacen dropped to his knees across from Ben, examining the damage. “Dev…” he croaked, his voice heavy with anguish. He began rocking back and forth, biting his fist to suppress the sobs torn from his throat. With his other hand, he grasped tightly to Dev’s hand. Rey could see it in his eyes even if Ben couldn’t; he knew.

Ben, drowning in more darkness than she had ever felt in him, was still naïve with hope. “Please, Dev, stay with me, help me do this.” he begged. He placed his hands over the wound across Dev’s chest, trying to remember the words he had once read in a book, trying to recall the lessons taught to him by the very man who was dying in his arms. Ben released his will to the Force, guiding the power flowing through his veins to save his friend. His own lifeforce began to leave his body, flowing into the wound; but the lifeforce flowing from the wound was greater than the lifeforce he was able to give. It was as if his energy met a wall in the Force, preventing him from saving his friend. He drew from deeper inside himself, increasing the flow into Dev.

He knew that his own death was a real possibility, but he would gladly die to save him. Dev was one of two people he considered family, and Rey knew she would have done the same if it was Finn. “Ben…” Jacen pleaded, but Ben refused to heed his warning. He was asking Ben to give up, and Rey knew him well enough to know Ben wouldn’t give up easily. He gave everything he had, pleading with the Force, his grandfather, even Snoke, to help him save the young man he considered his brother. Jacen struggled with the need to keep his friend alive at all costs, as Ben did, but also the fear of losing another person close to him. He could more easily see the truth that Ben denied. “Ben, stop; you’ll kill yourself!”

Ben ignored Jacen as he concentrated on his limited understanding of healing. “I should have listened,” he lamented, his voice wavering with despair. “I should have listened when you tried to teach me…”

“Ben, stop,” Dev rasped, echoing his friend’s warning. His hand shook as it covered Ben’s. “You can’t…”
While the others shouted at each other over the rain, Cade paced back and forth as he sobbed. “I’m so sorry, Dev. You weren’t supposed to be there…”

*I was, Ben finished for him. It should have unloved, unwanted, worthless, monster Ben. It should have been me.*

Crouching to the ground, Cade reached for Dev in a devastated sorrow of his own, but Ben stopped him with a glare Rey was certain was as vicious and vengeful as his energy felt. The hatred burned inside him, and Dev’s eyes filled with fear. His hand grasped tighter to Ben’s tunic in desperation. He tried to speak, to *beg*, but he couldn’t. Rey knew the last thing he saw was the resolution in Ben’s eyes.

*I will kill you, Cade.*

With his last breath, Dev watched his best friend turn to the darkness. Ben searched his friend’s eyes in panic as the convulsions stopped. “Dev?”

Rey had seen that endless stare before; Dev was gone.

“Ben…” Jacen gasped through sobs.

Ben, however, refused to give up. “Dev!” he cried, holding onto *hope* that his friend would be okay. He grasped Dev’s shoulders and shook him desperately as tears blurred his vision. When he didn’t respond, Ben pulled the robe from his friend’s body and began tearing open Dev’s sleep shirt to better access the wound.

“Ben, stop!” Jacen cried as he grabbed his arm and attempted to pull him away from their friend’s body. Ben shook his head, wrenching his arm free from Jacen’s grasp.

“No! I have to heal him!” he cried. “I have to… *I have to…*” Rey could feel the desperation in him to save his friend, but also the desperation to believe the lie, to hold onto hope. “Come on, Dev, you have to get up, we have to go, please,” he begged, his voice cracking. His hands were no longer doing anything purposeful, his fingers were just clenching and unclenching in the soaking wet material of his friend’s shirt. Jacen placed his hand over Ben’s fist, but Ben still held onto Dev. “*Please.*”
“Ben, let go,” Jacen breathed between broken sobs, “he’s dead. Dev’s gone.” The words were nearly lost over the torrent of rain pounding around them, but Ben heard it as much as he felt the words in the cold shivering across his skin, in the tightness of his throat, in the sinking in his gut, in every agonized squeeze in his heart. He felt it in the tear fracturing his soul.

“No.”

Ben shook his head, repeating the single word as if it was his lifeline to returning his world to the way it had been. Rey could see, however, that those two words had finally shattered through his denial. He closed his eyes, remembering his friend’s carefree laugh by the fire only hours before. Before. Before Luke had seen his vision in his thoughts, before his uncle had tried to kill him, before he brought the hut down upon them, before he had set the fire, before the others had confronted him, before Dev had… died. He wanted to go back to before.

Ben knew, however, that he couldn’t. The damage had been done; he had killed his uncle, he could never be a Jedi – he would never want to be a Jedi. His only option was to join Snoke, the only person who had ever warned him that this was how it would end, the only person who trusted in him to become someone. The vision was an inevitability, otherwise his uncle wouldn’t have made the decision to take his life. Staring down at his friend, he wished he hadn’t reacted with his survival instincts; he wished his uncle had ended his misery before he awoke.

With a tenderness contradictory to the darkness flooding through him, he tucked his now drenched robe around Dev. With trembling fingers, Ben slid his hand over his friend’s eyes to close them, and his brief control faltered. He cried out into the cold night and collapsed against his friend.

“It should have been me!” he sobbed into the drenched fabric, angry at his grandfather, uncle, his father, his mother, the New Republic, the Jedi, everyone that had pushed him down this path of no return. But most of all, he was angry at the Force. “Why didn’t you just take me!”

It wasn’t the Force who answered.

*I only wish you had come to me earlier,* Snoke whispered. *Only with darkness could I have shown you how to stop him from dying… I could have made you powerful enough to save him… it is too late now… but I can teach you to stop it from ever happening again…*

*Skywalker didn’t teach you… this is all his fault… he set these consequences into motion… he tried to kill you because he feared your power… he poisoned their minds against you… his*
disciple has taken the life of your friend… and if he believed in you as I do, then he would have taught you how to save your friend… His failure as a master is the reason for all of this… the new Jedi Order is a plague on the galaxy… spreading death and suffering in its wake… I can give you the power he never did… but you know what you have to do…

The Force had spared his life, and he knew why. It was too late to change the course of his fate; he wouldn’t allow his best friend’s death to be in vain. He would end the Jedi and anyone who stood in his way. Jacen must have sensed the heavy darkness that surrounded him, because his hand found his shoulder in support. Ben would have none of his consoling. He shrugged his friend away with a jerk of his shoulder and stood in a murderous rage. He turned toward Cade. “You bastard! You’ll die for this!”

Cade backed away slowly. Dal and Alema were closest and moved to stand in front of him. “It was a Jedi who tried to kill me and a Jedi who killed Dev. The Jedi Order must be destroyed; the Jedi must end. Snoke will complete our training if we vow our loyalty to him.” His voice was cold; the darkness snaked through him as he addressed the others.

“If you join the dark side, you would become everything we’ve been trained to fight against!” Cade shouted over the rain.

“The Jedi Order is everything we’ve been trained to fight against,” Ben lifted his lightsaber to level it at Cade. His face was illuminated in a cerulean glow. “Luke was a murderer, you’re a murderer… and you will pay for what you’ve done, as will anyone who stands in my way of delivering justice.”

Rey was surprised when Jacen stepped forward. “You’re either with him or against him,” Jacen challenged the others between sorrowful breaths. “Make your choice.”

Why didn’t you stop him, Jacen! Rey demanded in anger. Snoke wasn’t in your head; you were good! You know this wasn’t what Dev wanted!

When Ben turned to his friend, Rey could see the darkness in his eyes. Rey had assumed that the Jedi forbade attachment for the same reason she had struggled at the Resistance; to prevent opposing loyalty. Perhaps it was more complicated than that. Perhaps they forbade attachment, not in fear of love, but in fear of less. Jacen was fiercely loyal. He loved Ben like a brother. He had loved Dev like a brother, and he had felt the agony of losing that bond. It was clear in his eyes; he refused to lose Ben Solo too. If he had to surrender himself to the darkness to protect him, then he would do it. Jacen didn’t follow Ben to the Dark Side because he didn’t care about him, but because he did.
Corran and Kyp stepped forward, joining Jacen at his side. Jaina was not far behind, still panting from exertion. Rayf and Dorsk took a moment to look at each other before ultimately stepping forward, loyalty to their friends and disenfranchisement with the Jedi Order superseding any desire to join the dark side. The six students stood on either side of Ben, and Rey was suddenly reminded of her vision on Takodana.

In that moment, her bondmate decided that Ben Solo was dead; the weak and foolish boy had fallen when his uncle had given up on him and tried to kill him. The death of Dev inspired the rise of someone stronger, more powerful. From the ashes of Ben Solo was born Kylo Ren, the Jedi Killer. Kylo, Jacen, Jaina, Kyp, Rayf, Dorsk and Corran had chosen the path to become the Knights of Ren. “Before we go, Dev deserves a proper burial,” Kylo said, stepping into the role of leader seamlessly. The Knights set to their task in silence, but Kylo stayed behind. The remaining students loyal to Luke ignited their lightsabers, blocking him from Cade.

Clighal, Alema, and Dal stood between him and Dev’s murderer. They were determined to deliver justice for their fallen Master, and he was determined to deliver justice for his fallen brother. Dal stepped forward first. Kylo didn’t charge him as she had seen him do before. He waited for them to attack, as he had waited for her on Starkiller. His movements were more defensive than she expected. He backstepped, almost toying with them, waiting for them to make a mistake. They did. Rey knew their fates long before Dal and Clighal fell at Kylo’s feet. Alema was the last to stand between them.

“Dev loved you, Alema!” he shouted in fury, lowering his weapon to give her a choice. He had known it for years, had known long before Dev confided in him and had wondered if Dev’s morality would have ever allowed him to break the Jedi code for their love. “And you defend his murderer?”

“Dev would have defended his murderer!” she shouted back, her voice drowning in sorrow. “I love him too, Ben! And I know Dev believed in the Jedi; he believed in the Light! This isn’t what Dev would have wanted!”

“Dev is not here to say what he wanted! And he…” Kylo raised his weapon to level it at Cade again, “…is the reason my brother is gone. Stand aside or die with him.”

She raised her own weapon into a fighting stance, “Then you leave me no choice.”

“You’ll die, Alema!”
“So be it, Ben. Then in defending Dev, you will kill the woman he loves.” They both knew her words did nothing to break through his hatred for Cade. Her blade was swinging through the air before she had finished speaking. She was skilled, she was fierce, she was powerful, but she was no match for his wrath. She had made her choice, and he showed the woman his best friend had loved no mercy. He caught her unguarded side in a swift spin, and she dropped lifelessly to the muddy ground. The moment she collapsed, he diverted his eyes. He refused to glance down at what he had done.

Only Cade remained, unguarded.

Cade’s lightsaber remained abandoned next to where Dev’s body had lain only moments before. Cade stood tall as Kylo stepped closer like a wraith in the rain. “Beg the Force to save you,” Kylo said darkly. “Like I did before my uncle tried to kill me. Like I did when Dev was dying, because of what you did. Let’s see if fate is kinder to you.”

“No, I won’t beg for my life,” Cade said through tears, defiant in the face of death, “You do what you have to do, Ben. I deserve this for the part I played. Dev was the best of us, and he died by my hand. But we both know it should have been you; you are the reason all of this happened. You’ll have to live with the ghosts, Ben, not me. How many lives will it take for your ‘revenge?’ How many people would still be alive if you had never been born?”

Towering over Cade, brown eyes meeting green, Kylo did not hesitate this time. The fallen Jedi impaled him on his lightsaber, watching as Cade’s green eyes widened in grim acceptance. Cade never made a move to fight back. Kylo withdrew the blade, holding Cade upright as he watched the life drain from his eyes. Kylo’s hand shook as the realization struck him that he had taken four lives – three of them innocent – and he felt no regret. The problem was, he didn’t feel anything. It didn’t satiate the darkness burning inside him, the desire for vengeance. The rage inside him craved to destroy everything until that hunger for revenge subsided. When Cade’s body grew limp, he released him to collapse to the ground.

A sniffle behind him had Kylo spinning on his heels to find Tionne. She had chosen not to fight, she was no threat to him, he could have left her behind.

She will continue to train in honor of her fallen master… she will seek revenge against you… If you leave her alive… she will revive Skywalker’s Jedi Order … and she will kill the others… she will take Jacen from you too.

Rey knew, when Luke had told her the story of what had happened at the temple, that the others had either joined Kylo or fallen to his blade. Rey knew the choice he would make, but it didn’t stop her from begging him.
Don’t go this way, Ben. This is different than revenge. Or anger. This is taking the life of someone innocent and unarmed, she’s not a threat to you. Please, just let her go.

Rey felt his resolution as he found truth in Snoke’s words. He saw no other choice in the darkness. She knew what the darkness had almost convinced her to do, she knew how it twisted into thoughts and corrupted them, she knew he feared it was his only choice. She only wished she could have been there, to show him that it wasn’t. But the Force had only fated her to watch.

Kylo lifted the weapon above his head. The blue illuminated Tionne’s fear-stricken features. Staring into her eyes, he realized he couldn’t do it. He was suffocating under the weight of the darkness he had allowed inside, but it wasn’t enough. There was a glimmer of light – the voice of hope from somewhere deep inside him – that his fall into darkness had not eliminated that prevented his arm from swinging down upon her. Even at his darkest, there was still light, and he loathed it. With the betrayal he felt toward his family, fear of what he had done, anger toward the students who defended his uncle, hatred toward Cade, it was all too much. He wanted to feel nothing. He wanted the pain to end, but the light inside him fought desperately to save him.

“Come with us.” He pled with her as the light inside him appealed to everything good in him. He didn’t want to make that choice. “Join Snoke. He will show us – ”

Her answer was to call her lightsaber and swing it at his chest, forcing him to step back. “Never!”

Lunging forward, he ripped the lightsaber from her hand. He cried out into the night as he threw it as far away from them as he could. Rey could see the fear in the young woman’s eyes. She knew Tionne didn’t intend to hurt him, she only meant to keep his wrath at bay. He did not see her defensive posture for what it was. To him, she had made a choice; she had sided with the Jedi, she had become the enemy. Rey understood him well enough to know how he reacted to betrayal.

The events in the throne room were suddenly painted in a different light for Rey. Had he thought she was against him, too? She had taken the lightsaber because she refused to stay when he chose the path he did. It had been clear to her then that the dark side had a stronger hold on him than she had naïvely thought, and no person was strong enough to overcome that for him. He had to forsake it himself, he had to make his own choice, so she left. If he chose a path that led back to her, then, and only then, would Rey help him. Perhaps he didn’t see it that way, however, just as he didn’t see the desire to run in Tionne. Rey was wrong. Even if she had been there, she couldn’t have saved him.

Prove your loyalty to me… and there will be no more pain… no more suffering… no more wanting… you will feel nothing… you will have your peace… you know what you have to do.
His eyes dropped to the muddy ground, the puddle reflecting the burning temple behind him. The truth – as he saw it – was clear. It was too late, he had to destroy the Jedi Order for what Luke had done. He had to eliminate the Jedi; to protect the ones he had the chance to save and avenge the ones he didn’t. Tionne refused to join them. She believed he was the monster. She had sided with the Jedi, with Luke, with Cade. She had made her choice.

*I know what I have to do.*

“I know what I have to do.”

“Close your eyes,” he said as gently as he could muster under the pervasive darkness. Rey recognized those words from Mustafar.

Tionne’s tears blended with the raindrops trailing down her cheeks. “Please, Ben, let me go. I… I don’t want to die. Don’t do this. This isn’t you.”

“Just… close your eyes, Tionne,” he repeated, his voice breaking under the emotion. He disengaged his lightsaber, the night swallowing them in darkness.

Tionne began openly sobbing, but she nodded, complying with his request. “Imagine someplace beautiful,” he murmured, stalking closer. “Think of everything that makes you happy.” She nodded again, her sobs growing louder with every splash of his boot in the puddles surrounding them, rhythmic like the countdown of a chrono as he drew closer. He skimmed her mind, finding her thoughts centered on a beautiful garden of flowers, with her dead friends and… him. He was smiling, laughing and carefree in a way Kylo knew he would never be again. There was light, beauty, and peace, but it only reminded him of his heart full of darkness. She would find none of that in the face of the monster looming over her, so with a twitch of his hand, he ensured her eyes stayed closed.

The images in her mind burned in his own and Kylo reached up to her temple, found her connection to consciousness, and swiftly severed it. Her last thoughts shouldn’t have been of him. He caught her in one arm, her body limp, her breathing slow and deep. Placing the hilt of his lightsaber against her chest, he hesitated. Could he do this, could he ensure the vision he hated was realized? Could he become no better than his grandfather?

*I’m not "becoming" anything; this is all I’ve ever been. It’s too late. The damage has been done, the Jedi Order needs to be stopped. If I don’t do it, all of Snoke’s warnings will come true. He was right about everything. I will see the end of the Jedi, just as my grandfather tried to do. Then I can have my peace.*
With a flick of the switch, the blade was ignited and extinguished in between breaths, just a flash of crimson on their faces. “It’s over,” he whispered. It was quick, it was painless, but he had taken a path of no return. Snoke had ensured that. He’d had many choices to save himself, but he had chosen to slaughter them all.

Rey had no doubt the images of that night – and the cries of the dying – would haunt her nightmares for the rest of her life, just as she had no doubt that Luke had heard those agonized cries when he searched through his nephew’s mind. The irony was not lost on her that his desire to prevent it was the very catalyst that caused it. And if she learned one thing from Luke, it was that visions of the future were dangerous.

_I don’t understand, if he had lost Jacen, too, then it would all make sense. Those two bonds meant everything to him. Dev was lost, but he saved Jacen. How could Jacen allow him to fall so far? Snoke was in Ben’s head, but not Jacen’s. Why didn’t Jacen save him from Snoke? Where is he now? Why does Ben refuse to let anyone else close to him when he has a bond like that?_
Warning! This chapter and the following chapters are very dark chapters. Rey is reliving some of Kylo's darkest memories. If you're concerned about a trigger, it is likely in here. There is graphic violence, many characters deaths, physical torture, psychological torture, grooming of a young child, gaslighting, abuse, manipulation, you name it. If you have a specific trigger, it's better to play it safe and message me with concerns as there are many specific violent scenarios encountered here. Nothing written here is worth putting yourself through mental duress. I would be more than happy to piece together parts of the chapters or give a detailed overview as I understand they are important chapters.

Okay, now that we got that out of the way, if you want to know the names of the actresses and actors I chose to play the new characters, here they are:

Jacen - Aaron Paul  
Jaina- Alexandra Daddario  
Kyp - Adrian Grenier  
Corran- Norman Reedus  
Rayf- Satoshi Tsumabuki  
Dorsk- Common  
Tionne- Chloe Grace Moretz  
Dev- Tom Holland  
Alema- Zendaya  
Dal- Dayo Okeniyi  
Clighal- Masie Williams  
Cade- Tom Felton
Chapter Summary

Fun fact - a few of Snoke/Sidious's monologues belong to Sidious and other Sith from Legends

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story is 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
---CHAPTER 65---

The memory faded into a new one.

Kylo was pacing in an empty room, in front of a window overlooking a large building, the darkness she sensed in him split by the intense light she had felt before. The destruction of Luke's temple had not extinguished the light permanently as he had hoped.

Rey was hyperventilating – Kylo was hyperventilating – his hair gripped tightly in his fists.

His thoughts were focused on a conflict raging inside him.
I did my job. I used persuasion on the guards; my mission is complete. Everything else is out of my hands.

He had proven his loyalty to Snoke and the darkness. The Amaxine Warriors would do what was needed to ensure the First Order’s survival. The bomb would be detonated at the breakfast conference with or without his help. That was it. He had to allow it to happen. Leia had too much power in the Senate. He knew she had become a complication to the plans of the Order. He was positive she knew what happened at the temple; it had been long enough, and she had done nothing to find him.

She’d had her chance; Snoke refused to train any of them until they had proven their loyalty to him, but she had pretended like he never existed. She was too worried about being related to Darth Vader. He knew all of that. She didn’t care. And as long as she was alive, she would never allow the First Order to bring law and control to a chaotic galaxy. It shouldn’t matter to him; she had lied, she had abandoned him, she deserved it for what she had done. He knew all of that, and yet, the foolish love for her wouldn’t fade.

Kylo knelt next to the window, resting his head in his hands, the sun of Hosnian Prime warming his shoulders. He searched for guidance in the darkness, but something deep inside him, something the darkness could not touch begged him to save her. He began pacing again, his heart beating wildly in his chest, as he tried to convince himself that his mother deserved to die. But the drive to save her remained.

I can't. I can't stand here and let her die.

No, there’s nothing I can do, it's too late, the bomb has been set. I can't stop it.

I have to...

His eyes scanned the empty room, desperate for an answer. His gaze fell upon his pack.

I have to warn her.

The message would have to be brief – and messy so she didn’t recognize his writing. She could never know he warned her. He opened the pack and removed a stylus and ink from inside. He had no parchment, but he knew there must be something he could write a message on in the conference
room. He moved to the window, reaching into the Force to map a layout of the room.

*I could find something, a poster, a sign...a streamer and hide it under a napkin at her assigned seat so only she can find it...*

From the window, he caught a glimpse of a strong Force signature walking across the courtyard. *Leia.* He immediately withdrew from the Force and blocked his energy to the best of his abilities, hoping she had not sensed his presence. Her hair was arranged in a perfect Alderaanian braid, and her smile caused a crushing pain in his chest. Rey was taken aback by the strength of the love that remained in Kylo's heart for his mother.

*Leia* was speaking to a man he did not recognize, unaware of the fate awaiting her at the conference. Kylo could have walked across the courtyard and warned her himself, but he didn't want her to know it was him. He couldn't look in her eyes as she stared at her fallen son. He remembered the expression on her face when she spoke about his grandfather; he couldn't let her see the monster he was. As deeply as he ached to see her, to ask her why she had abandoned him, he made his decision. He would leave the warning for her, and after that, he could be done with her.

*But what would convince her? It has to be something simple.*

Kylo quietly left the room before he could change his mind. The bomb would still detonate as planned; his only intervention would be a message. That was not treachery, he convinced himself, because Leia's fate would still be in her own hands. Rey couldn't help but wonder if he had only chosen to go to his mother instead, if she could have saved him. This version of Kylo was not a cold and ruthless murderer. He was a scared and broken boy.

*What changed?* she wondered. *Or did he just become better at hiding it? Has this lost soul been the true boy behind the mask all along?*

Kylo pulled the hood of his cloak over his head, blinking back tears as he made his way to the conference room where his mother – without intervention – would meet certain death. His chest constricted in guilt – guilt for betraying the First Order, guilt for not being as strong as he wished he could be, like Vader, and guilt for coming within yards of the mother he hadn't seen in years and turning away. If she looked as broken as he felt, he didn't know if he could return to the First Order.

Set in his decision, and with his energy actively blocked in the Force from her and the others, he brushed past his mother into the building. He was a looming shadow of darkness, hardly someone
who was easily missed, but her eyes did not even shift his way. She laughed at something her colleague said. *Laughed!* Rey braced herself for his hatred but found only despair.

Kylo loathed himself for how profoundly he missed his mother, but with that laugh, he was convinced she was happier without him in her life. Her son was missing, after all, and she was smiling and continuing her work as if he never existed. For all she knew, he was dead. She hadn't come searching for him, hadn't even released a statement pleading for his return. She had done nothing. She hadn't lifted a finger to get him back, only confirming to him that he had made the correct choice. He would have done anything to protect her, died for her, before they abandoned him. But she made it clear she didn't want him – she had never wanted him.

At the First Order, he had access to the holonet in ways he did not have planet-hopping with Luke and the other padawans. He had learned all about the young senators Leia had taken under her wing, and the young pilots Han had trained. They were the surrogate children his parents had always wished they had. Kylo believed he had been replaced long before the night he burned Luke's temple. Rey could feel how deeply it wounded him, yet he wouldn't allow his mother to die.

He used persuasion on the same guards that had allowed the team into the building to plant the bomb earlier that morning. The people in the corridors were quick to move out of his way as he focused determinedly on the destination. Perhaps they could sense his resolution in the energy around them, or perhaps they caught a glimpse of the hardened features of his face, but they scattered from his path like swamp rats.

_That's it, run away. Fear me,_ he thought as he used more persuasion to influence their memories.

Watching them scurry as if they sensed the monster inside him ultimately gave him the idea. He knew what he should write. It was simple, unmistakable and sufficiently poignant as a warning.

_Run._

Rey had little time to ponder whether he had gone through with the plan to save her or if Snoke had discovered his involvement as a new memory emerged.

Kylo’s eyes were closed, or covered, but she knew he was standing before Snoke, because she could *see* him without actually seeing him. Rey understood he was using the Force, but this was not perceptions or feelings. The objects and people were visible as varying degrees of bright white light. Though the people standing around him retained their forms, they were all *vibrating.* At first, she wondered if their brightness was related to the light within them, but with Snoke appearing the
brightest, she presumed that it was the strength of their energy in the Force. It reminded her that –
though their power in the Force was equal – their understanding of it was not.

**You need a teacher,** he’d told her. Maybe she did.

Though she didn’t know *how or why,* she knew he was waiting for something. She could feel the
calming effect of his slow, steady breathing. It was the only sound in the room.

Then there was a bright flash from one of the forms, and Kylo raised his bright plasma blade. There
was a beam of light that traveled the distance between them. It created a blazing spark when it
connected with his blade. It was the unique sound of a blaster that enlightened Rey to the exercise.
They were firing at him, as she had in the forest, and he was blocking them. It was clearly training,
with blasters set to stun.

Rey felt the ripple of something in the Force – a warning – and Kylo turned to block another beam
of light. Despite the constant assault of energy, his movements were less wild and more agile than
she remembered from her own duels against him. He was surprisingly restrained, even in darkness.

“More,” Snoke commanded. There were more warnings in the Force from all around him; the
others were no longer taking turns to target him. His pulse increased with his speed as he tried to
calculate in fractions of a second the trajectory of the next threat. After several near misses, Snoke
instructed him again.

“Use the darkness *and* the light to guide you.” It was strange advice from a creature of darkness.
As far as Rey knew, Snoke had demanded Kylo to destroy the light inside him. Had it not always
been that way? What had changed?

Kylo released himself to the Force’s guidance, using the darkness for speed and the light for
anticipation. As they were fired in rapid succession, Kylo parried and blocked as he moved back
and forth fluidly in a circle. Rey felt something close to pride in his capabilities.

“*More,*” Snoke growled. The others fired near-simultaneously. Rey could feel his panic as he tried
in vain to block them all. When one slipped through his defenses, he attempted to slow its velocity,
but it was too late.

Or it would have been, if the beam hadn’t been suspended centimeters from his chest. His breath
hitched in fear, and he tensed as he prepared for impact, until he realized someone had saved him.
Kylo tore off the blindfold, staring down at the fatal red beam hovering close enough that it had singed his tunic. The blasters were not set to stun. Kylo was thankful that his master had intervened, but when the beam was redirected away from him, he realized that it was Jacen’s hand that twitched, not Snoke’s.

*He would have saved me,* Kylo convinced himself. *He knew Jacen would do it.*

Though when Snoke turned to Jacen with disdain, he wasn’t as certain. “If you seek to aid everyone who suffers in the galaxy, you will only weaken yourself… and weaken *them.* It is the internal struggles, when fought and won on their own, that yield the strongest rewards. You stole the struggle from them, cheapened it. If you care for others, then dispense with pity and sacrifice and recognize the value in letting them fight their own battles. And when they triumph, they will be even stronger in victory.” Jacen nodded in deference. “And as a reward for your… intervention, you are next.” Jacen nodded obediently, but when his eyes met Kylo’s, there was uncertainty there.

Snoke turned back to stare at Kylo. “You’ll need more training if you expect to become my apprentice, young Solo.”

“Oh! With your guidance, I can do it, Master,” Kylo said, panting from the exertion. “I’ll train harder. I’ll find a balance. I’ve already learned so much more with you than I ever learned with –”

Before Kylo could finish his conviction, blue sparks had flown from the creature’s fingers into his chest. Kylo was on his back by the time he realized Snoke had used lightning against him. He clenched his teeth against the residual pain, accepting the admonishment as “necessary.” It sickened Rey that he was almost… grateful. Snoke stared at him for a long moment, undoubtedly skimming his thoughts, before he finally spoke. “What have I told you?”

“The past is the ghost that haunts us. Ghosts must be banished. Lingering on the past is weakness.”

“And?” Snoke gestured vaguely with an air of boredom to his tone.

Kylo’s stare slid to the floor. “Fortune does not favor the blind, the ignorant, the arrogant or the naïve. Trust is weakness. Once you let your guard down, there’s nothing to shield you from the knife in your back.”

This time, when the lightning arced from Snoke’s fingers, Kylo raised the weapon to defend himself. Snoke smiled. “We are, all of us, always being tested, young Solo. It makes us stronger,
and strength is power, and power is purpose. We must succeed against the trials we face... or die in
the effort.” The lesson did not end there, however. The creature raised his hands again, directing
the lightning at Kylo, but this time when Kylo blocked it, he bounced more energy off the floor.
Kylo was unprepared for the second arc, and it knocked him down again. He pushed up onto his
hands, confused. His question of why must have been apparent in his eyes, because the creature
answered.

“The first was a test, the second a reminder,” he explained. “The master and apprentice relationship
is symbiotic, but in a delicate balance. An apprentice owes his master loyalty and must be
dedicated to destroying his weaknesses. A master owes his apprentice knowledge and must be
careful in showing only strength. These obligations are reciprocal and contingent. Should either fail
in his obligation, it is the duty of the other to destroy him. The Force requires it.”

Kylo stood again, chin lifted high. Snoke’s words only inspired him to fight through every lesson
his master taught him, no matter how brutal. He would destroy his weaknesses, or die trying. “I
will not fail you.”

Snoke’s eyes brightened as if in challenge. “We’ll see.”

The memory faded into a new one.

Kylo had collapsed to both knees on the floor, gasping for air, as Snoke towered over him. Rey
sensed Kylo’s defiance as he stared up at him.

“Yes, pathetic child, let the anger and the hate burn through you. This fiery spit of hope reminds
me of your mother. Your grandfather had quite the difficulty torturing her. Alas, he was too
focused on the use of the Force as punishment to see the true effectiveness of these powers for
enlightenment. And he did not share my resolve. Or capabilities. But you... you have such
potential. You have the capability to hate the ones who could undo you that he never did. In the
end, he was weak. We will break you of your weaknesses, one way or another, and then you will
kill Luke Skywalker. You will be the Skywalker they all remember.”

Rey sensed Kylo’s confusion. Luke Skywalker was alive? He couldn’t be. Kylo sensed nothing
from him after he had awoken in the debris of that hut. It had to be a test, to see how he would
react. What bothered him more was the very thing Snoke had once wanted him for originally— his
strength in both the darkness and the light – had now become the one thing the creature wanted to
train out of him. When their training had first begun, Snoke promised to teach Kylo abilities that
made him a stronger adversary. His lessons were focused on tapping into the power of the
darkness, but also using the light to keep the mind sharp. As the training progressed, however,
something had gradually changed between them.
The more powerful Kylo became, the more Snoke desired to drive out his light. Perhaps it was the threat of Luke Skywalker. Perhaps Snoke began to fear the strength of the light in him and his attachment to the others. Perhaps Snoke just couldn’t stand the thought of Kylo becoming more powerful than him. No matter the reason, Rey wished Kylo had seen what she saw; nothing would ever be good enough for Snoke. His training made Kylo weaker. Yes, he taught the fallen Jedi how to properly manipulate the Force, but he would have never allowed him to become as powerful as he could be.

Apprentice became captive, training became torture, but it had happened so seamlessly that Kylo didn’t see it for what it was. He believed if he just tried harder, did better, fulfilled every order that Snoke dangled as the "finish to his training," then the abuse would end. Snoke was systematically weakening his apprentice, manipulating him into a weapon reliant upon his master, and, though Rey could see it, Kylo couldn’t. He was the same lost boy, trying to be "good," to change himself to be in the good graces of someone else; but just as he had failed before, he couldn’t be what Snoke wanted him to be.

Kylo’s throat began to constrict again. Rey panicked as the air compressed in her own lungs, but he sat motionless, save for the convulsing in his muscles from the lack of oxygen. He stared up at the creature, fighting the self-preservation instinct to grasp at his throat as he struggled for air. The shadow of unconsciousness overcame him, but the monster released him as he collapsed forward. Kylo gasped for breath on his forearms, beads of sweat dripping down the strands of hair falling over his forehead.

His windpipe collapsed again under the pressure of the Force tightening around his neck. He struggled to push himself back up to his knees, raising his eyes to the monster who was slowly drawing the life from his lips. Snoke chuckled as he held his gaze. As Kylo lost his connection to the conscious world, he was released again. The creature leaned down, grasping Kylo’s chin in his hand.

“You...will...submit,” Snoke rasped, “Or you will die fighting a winless battle. Only when I bring you to the border of death will I release you. I will allow you to take enough breaths to remember the taste of oxygen. Then it will all begin again. I will do this over and over and over until we break that defiant streak in you, young Solo. Find the darkness, destroy the weakness of the light inside you. You choose how long this takes.”

Snoke released his chin and slid his gnarled fingertip along Kylo’s cheek to catch a falling tear. Kylo flinched under the monster’s touch, which elicited a tut of disapproval. Rey’s skin crawled as she remembered the revolting sensation of the creature’s hand grasping her face.

Kylo struggled to control the shuddering of his oxygen-starved body. His eyes burned from the
broken blood vessels, but entirely out of stubborn spite, he never broke eye contact with the creature. She begged him to let go, for both their sakes, even as she felt the strength surge into his aching muscles. There was a light, a hope, illuminating the darkness of his mind. I can save you, a child’s voice whispered. Snoke sensed the newfound strength he had drawn from that hope. He smiled cruelly, holding Kylo’s defiant gaze as he drained the oxygen from his lungs. Kylo attempted to stand, but his body would not cooperate.

“Why do you hold onto this imaginary embodiment of hope?” the creature chuckled. “Did you forget? Even she abandoned you a decade ago. She stopped finding you in your darkest hours, she left you alone to struggle against the nightmares, she is no better than your parents. You weren’t even worthy enough for her love, and she was a delusion of your imagination. But I believe you will show them all how worthy you truly are. Yes, you have great potential. Such strength. And your attachment to the light will break...eventually.”

I don’t understand. Why didn’t he leave? What power did Snoke hold over him that he would choose to remain under his control? Why would he call that man his master? Yes, in his mind, Luke would have killed him. But Snoke was no better; why did he stay?

Rey did not have time to further ponder her questions.

A wall of psychological agony crashed through her senses. She cried out and was answered with a wicked, vile laugh that chilled her to the bone. Snoke. The next sound churned her stomach, bile rising to her throat. It was Kylo’s tormented screams. He writhed violently on the floor, scratching at his face, ripping out his hair, anything to alleviate the torture in his mind. Images and emotions flashed in relentless visions as Snoke tore the rest of his memories apart. The jagged, broken snippets of happy memories Rey had witnessed in his mind hadn’t been Kylo’s doing, but Snoke’s. Rey would have wondered if he had lost all happy memories of his childhood, and how that had affected him, if his screams weren’t drowning her in her own darkness.

All she could do was watch as his darkest fears were realized over and over again before his eyes. The ones he loved were graphically beaten, tortured, brutalized and murdered by his own hands, each vision more vicious than the last. Their unseeing eyes, broken bodies, nauseating screams permeated his senses – her senses – but he lay powerless to do anything but experience it all. The smell of burning flesh and the metallic taste of blood overwhelmed her. Even as an observer of a memory, it felt all too real. Every nightmare, every doubt, every fearful thought was used against him, twisting into reality in his mind. There was no escape; he couldn’t shut his eyes to the images in his own head.

As soon as his mind began to numb to the obscene and depraved images, the ruthless black claws tearing apart his consciousness would release him. As he regained control of his mind, his senses returned. Screams echoed off the walls. He rolled, disoriented, to his side, searching the room for the source of the screams. The others were suffering equal torment. Jacen was struggling on the
floor across from him as he faced the same psychological torture. Drawing blood from the deep
gouges he was carving into his own face with his fingernails, his screams of torment cut through
the haze in Kylo’s mind. He called out for Jacen, aching to provide his friend a sliver of hope, but
the cold, black claws tore into his mind again. The break in the torture had been just long enough
to remind him of the overwhelming mercilessness of the torment on his senses.

Every happy memory he’d had – his mother’s loving eyes, his father’s approving smile, Dev’s
comforting words, Jacen’s infectious laugh, tickle fights with Chewbacca – were torn into
fractured flashes of memory or twisted, contorted, and permanently remolded into something evil
and stomach-churning. Rey had never imagined such depraved horrors, and judging from the
vomit that Kylo retched upon the floor, neither had he.

*Please let me die. Please let me die. Please let me die,* his mind begged.

The dark claws released his mind from the torture just long enough for his humanity to return, and
then the torment began again. The focus would vacillate between horrors he wrought upon others –
the people he loved most – and then his own torture, all without him suffering a single wound. Rey
assumed that was how Snoke explained away the cruelty of it.

Inside his mind, anything could become a reality. It felt as if every bone was crushed under a
massive weight until it shattered; his skin felt as if it was ripped from his body over and over again,
his limbs severed one by one, he was lit on fire, caustic chemicals injected into his bloodstream, he
was fed on by rathtars, and it all became his reality, because his mind *believed* it was. All he could
do was thrash and scream.

*How long did he suffer like that? Hours? Days? I don’t want to imagine. How could he have been
loyal enough to do those terrible things for someone who tortured him like that? Torture is not a
strong enough word for that evil. Why did he stay?*

The vision faded. Then there was darkness. Only darkness. There was no connection to the Force.
It was a numbing experience, even for Rey, who had spent the majority of her life without it. He
could not stand in the cold, cramped room – *no, not a room* – it was a dome-shaped prison of
Force.

The containment field was impenetrable and electrified. The shock itself would have been
tolerable, had he not been immersed in water. Every brush of the barrier sent a paralyzing current
seizing through his muscles, leaving a crushing pain in his chest and a grinding ache in his lower
jaw. That didn’t stop him from beating at it relentlessly when the only thread left connecting him to
sanity was pain.
Rey could sense him teetering on the borderline of delusional. He was attempting to function without sleep. Even if the nightmares would relent, the prison itself was designed to hinder sleep. Enough water covered the chamber floor that he could only lie down by submerging at least one of his ears. The water was charged with a ringing tone that was maddening for even the few seconds that Rey experienced it. His throat was raw from screaming, his fists bloody from striking the barrier, his body weak from the electrocution and whatever torment he had been subjected to previously.

Rey had seen him unhinged before, but this was... something else. His mental stability was a jumbled tangle of emotions held together by a single thread. She wondered how long he had been confined like that; no food, desperate to sleep, senses deprived, and perceptions altered. Had he been left in there hours, days, weeks? She knew it was less that he had lost track of time and more that time no longer existed to him. There was an agony cracking deeply within his soul, the darkness seeping in to fill the emptiness. The boy he once had been was gone. He was nobody, nothing, broken pieces held together by darkness; he was existing in a purgatory of time and reality. The loneliness devoured his soul. He was exactly what Snoke wanted him to be.

Left with nothing but the torture of his own thoughts, he relived the warped memories that Snoke had manipulated into nightmares. The light was gone, the will to fight eliminated, the voices of hope quiet. But another voice was not. She felt the dark claws of Snoke tear through his mind. A vision of someone she could only assume was Darth Vader consumed his thoughts.

“Grandson.”

Kylo looked beyond the energy containing him to see the Force ghost of Darth Vader. A calm settled over him in the presence of the apparition; something he hadn’t felt since he had been thrown into the cell to destroy his weaknesses and prove his "strength." Kylo tensed his body to control the shuddering of weakness. “Grandfather.”

“I need you to finish what I started,” the man said. “Our bloodline is not a curse as you have been led to believe. You do not yet know the true power of the dark side; you can become stronger in the Force than they ever imagined. They will kneel at your feet and regret the day they underestimated you. See through the lies of the Jedi, create order through their destruction. Do not fear the dark side; let the anger and hate guide you. Defeat the weakness of the light. You will bring peace, freedom, justice, and security to your new empire, as I did. Kill Luke and end the Jedi order. Avenge my death at the hands of my own son. Let no one stand in your way. It is your... destiny.” An image of Kylo in his onyx robes and mask – exuding power, strength, and authority – flashed through his mind. There was no conflict in his heart, only emotionless peace.

The yearning for that peace enraged Kylo as he grasped for the darkness that was just beyond his reach. That vision became his will to survive, but also the focus of all the wrath that had built in his torment. He felt it rising inside him to levels beyond his control. It was something hateful and dark,
and he was too weak to fight it. The loneliness, betrayal, fear, rage, and pain clawed their way out in an explosion of suffering.

Kylo screamed.

Shock waves rippled through the Force, leveling everything around him. When he realized that it had collapsed the dome of Force around him, he pushed himself into a wide stance on wobbling legs. The Force flooded back into his veins and, for once, he felt relief in finding it there. Raising his eyes from the floor, he met the stare of his master.

Snoke smiled. “Did you feel that power when you channeled your fear and anger? Use it. It’s the only path to your destiny.”

A new memory emerged.

Kylo dejectedly knelt before Snoke, his head bowed in defeat. The other six students were lined up in front of Snoke in the vast training room, with a hooded prisoner at each of their feet. Rey sensed that he knew what would happen, that he had feared this moment. Kylo obediently stood at Snoke’s command.

“The Sith believed that ‘taking the life of an innocent is always harder even than taking your own, if you're sincere. This is the ultimate test of selflessness – whether you're ready to face unending emotional pain – true agony – to gain the power to create peace and order for billions of total strangers. That is the sacrifice. To be vilified by others, by people you know and care for, and for the personal sacrifice to be totally unknown to those billions you save. To do your duty for the good of the galaxy. It's easy to be a clean-cut, hero-slaying monsters. There's always a little bit of vanity to it. There can be no room for vanity or pride in being despised.”

“This is your final test before you face the other fallen Jedi in combat. This is a simple test. You will kill the six prisoners before you for the First Order. If you hesitate, your fellow apprentices will be punished until you complete the task. If you refuse to complete your task, you will die.”

Kylo swallowed apprehensively as he approached Dorsk, who held the first prisoner. He refused to look him or the other apprentices in the eye “Lower your defenses.” Kylo did as commanded, allowing Snoke complete control over his mind. Rey felt the revolting touch of the creature in her mind as he felt it in his. Dorsk removed the hood, and Luke Skywalker was staring back at him.
Snoke cackled.

Kylo knew logically that Luke was an illusion of Snoke’s manipulation. He had seen it before in training; the illusion distorted reality and reason. Snoke could make him see exactly who he wanted him to see...and hear. But it was all in his mind. They were merely insignificant prisoners of the First Order. Unfortunately, that rationality was falling to the delusion; his mind was at the mercy of his master.

“Begin.”

Kylo ignited his cerulean lightsaber, a burning reminder of the boy he had been. It had been altered, of course, the training knob removed, the intensity of the plasma set at full lethality. This would not be the first life he had taken with the weapon, but it was the first time he wondered if the crystal would continue to aid and guide him through the Force. Though it did feel right that the life taken would belong to a prisoner who looked – in his mind – like his one, true enemy, Luke Skywalker.


*If only it was Luke.*

Kylo smiled as he severed the man’s head. The darkness pulsed around him and through him. Sorrow deepened in Rey’s heart as the darkness slowly penetrated deeper into his soul, twisting into his defiant core of light. With every new band of darkness that clawed its way in, he became more like the man she recognized. Kylo was intent to deliver the fate of the prisoners as quickly as possible.

Rayf met his eyes as he removed the second prisoner’s hood. Kylo stilled as he recognized Chewbacca. He had thought after Luke that he would be eliminating his enemies, not murdering his family. What happened to leaving the ghosts in the past? The Wookie whined and growled his pleas for him to spare his life, reminding him of the childhood games they played when his parents were away. He apologized for wounding Kylo with the bowcaster, but he ignored his plea for forgiveness. Kylo sliced through him instead. He waited for the emotional heartache, but he was oddly numb to it as the prisoner that his mind told him was Chewie slumped to the floor in a pool of blood.

Corran had his eyes downcast as he revealed the next prisoner. Kylo shuddered as he met the eyes of his father. He hoped Snoke couldn’t see memories pooling his eyes.
It’s not real. It’s not real. It’s just in my head. This means nothing.

“Ben, it’s not too late. I miss you. Your mother misses you. You're not a monster or a burden. We know you can be good,” the illusion of his father told him. Kylo bit his tongue to stop himself from responding to the man, from begging to know why he left him. “I’m sorry we lied to you about your grandfather and left you alone with Luke. But I’ve come back for you like I promised I would. Come home. I’ll help you, son,” his voice broke as he begged. Kylo shook his head as he fought back tears.

This isn’t real.

His father refused to look at him the last time he saw him. He left him. He never came back for him. He never loved him.

Kylo did what he had to do. He closed his eyes and impaled his father through the heart.

It’s not real. He’s not real, he reminded himself.

When he reopened his eyes, his father’s shocked eyes stared back at him. He didn't feel sorrow; Kylo was almost relieved as his father collapsed. He felt himself shedding the weaknesses of attachment as he killed the past. He was convinced the exercise would only bring him more strength. Rey's heart ached as she remembered in detail when the real man fell at his son's hand.

Kylo tore his stare away from his father and stepped in front of Kyp. He knew who would be under the next hood. Kyp removed the hood and he had to swallow the bile rising in his throat. His resolve wavered.

Mother.

“Ben, my sweet boy. You were right. I spent too much time away from you, ignoring our family and the whispers in your head. I’m so sorry. If you come home, I’ll give it all up. We can be a family again. We love you, and we never gave up on you,” she said gently, tears falling down her cheeks. He wanted nothing more than to dry her tears, to beg her to take him home.
No, she’s not real!

But it was as if reason was just out of reach. Snoke’s control was not only altering perception but logic as well. He couldn’t remember that it was a random prisoner. All he saw was her. His mission, however, was not forgotten. They had already made their choices, and so had he.

If he could kill his father, then he could kill his mother as well. With a trembling hand, he stepped forward. He pressed the blue blade into his mother’s chest, in a swiftness he hoped ended her suffering quickly, as she screamed in agony.

I’m sorry.

She lay unmoving at his feet, her eyes – the eyes his father said looked like his eyes – staring blank and empty up at him. It was only when there was nothingness in her eyes that he realized how deeply he still loved his mother.

What have I done?

Somewhere inside he knew she wasn't dead, that he could go back to her. But she wouldn't tell him the things he needed her to say. That wasn't real; she had left him to be murdered by his uncle. And, even if he wanted to leave, it was too late. He had made his choice. He blinked back tears as he forced himself to move to the next prisoner. Rey felt his body tremble uncontrollably as he increased his grip on the lightsaber.

Jaina stood in front of him, her eyes pleading with him to finish it quickly.

He killed Luke, Chewie, Han, and Leia. Who else can he be forced to murder? Rey wondered.

When Jaina removed the hood, Rey’s heart clenched. Kylo’s eyes were locked on the face, unable to look away.

“Ben, don’t do this!” Dev cried with tears in his eyes.

Kylo shook his head as he exhaled a trembling breath. He’s dead. This is isn’t real…
Images of Luke crushed under the weight of the collapsed hut, of rising again, of **reviving** the other students passed through his mind. Rey knew it was a manipulation of Snoke, but even she questioned its veracity. Luke was powerful, he **could** have restored life. But she remembered what Kylo had said in the jungle. If he had been telling the truth, then reincarnation was a dark side skill.

Kylo felt him struggle to sift through his own memories, to prove it to himself, to prove Dev died that fateful night and was not kneeling in front of him. He couldn’t break through the fetters on his mind. “Please, Ben. It’s a trick! It’s me! I didn’t die that night. Skywalker brought me back, but the First Order found me. Please, you have to help me!”

Kylo studied the young man on his knees. He looked like Dev, he sounded like Dev, he had the same plea in his eyes. He hadn’t felt his energy in what felt like a lifetime, but he knew it was his. He had to be Dev. What if it was a trick? What if Snoke was testing him? What if he drove his saber through the only other person who mattered to him anymore?

*I can’t do it! I can’t! I won't kill him!*

Rey heard a scream, and Jaina fell to the ground as Force lightning coursed through her. She writhed in agony as Kylo searched Dev’s pleading face. “I trusted you!” his friend cried. “You’re better than this. I see the path before you, Ben. Don’t choose this way, it’s not too late. Don’t betray me like Luke betrayed you! You're like my brother!”

*It’s not real. It’s not real! It’s all in my head. He’s gone, I watched him die in my arms that night, I tried to save him. He couldn’t be saved…*

*But I thought Luke was dead too. What if…*

*No! the others weren’t real, he isn’t real either!* he tried to convince himself, but the illusion spread whispers of doubt in his mind. Jaina was screaming, Dev was pleading, and Kylo realized the sobs were coming from himself.

Before he lost the resolve, he thrust the blade forward. Tears cut down his face, like a scar, as he pierced the heart of his brother, ending the pain quickly. The screaming stopped as the body fell to the floor. The only sound was his guttural cries, his voice reverberating off the training room walls as he screamed at the heavens.
His memories returned, a small mercy from Snoke. Flashes of that night returned; the blood trickling from Dev’s nose as he convulsed, the disappointment in his eyes, his plea. Kylo’s hands shook violently and he refused to glance at his master's eyes. He knew the disapproval he would find there.

He stared down at the body of a stranger, feeling a mixture of relief that he had not killed his friend and sorrow that Dev was truly gone. His renewed grief would have to be buried down deep with the jagged pain of everything else that would make him weak. He couldn’t spare another tear for his best friend, because he knew it wasn't over.

Rey understood as he did – the last prisoner was much smaller. Too small. A child, Rey realized. He shut his eyes as Jacen removed the hood. He refused to see what he knew would be there, but what he had shut from sight he could sense in the Force. Snoke ensured that.

“Ben, it’s not too late,” the child’s voice whimpered. “I can help you.”

Snoke sensed his hesitation. “Would you give your life, Jacen's life, for an imaginary girl? Even if the child was real, she promised that she would never leave you. But she lied. She saw the monster you are inside and left you! Just like everyone else. She made Ben Solo weak, but you are strong now as Kylo Ren. You do not need any of them; they held you back, they used you, they underestimated your true power. Kill her, kill them all, only then can you be what you were destined to be.”

“I can save you,” the child pleaded.

“But I can’t save you,” Kylo whispered to the child, collapsing to his knees. Screams echoed in the room, electricity vibrating in the air around them. Rey knew if Kylo opened his eyes, she would see Jacen thrashing on the floor.

Whether it’s the girl or not, whether she deserved this for leaving me alone... this is still a child!

“Make your choice!” Snoke bellowed. “Jacen dies, the girl dies, and you die. Or...just the girl.”

No, I can’t do it!
“Destroy your hope, Solo!”

I can’t!

“Please!” Jacen pleaded.

“You’re killing him!” Jaina screamed. There was another vibration of energy through the air and her cries of pain joined her brother’s as she writhed on the floor next to him.

I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Please forgive me, I have no choice.

Rey felt him force out the light, succumbing to the darkness. He allowed the Force to guide his arm, surrendering to its will. As the humming blade met flesh, all the screaming abruptly stopped. Not a single tear was left to shed. He was numb. Innocent people were dead by his hand – a child was dead by his hand, and he had, in his mind, murdered nearly every single person that had ever meant something to him. Nearly. The others were still alive, Jacen was still alive. Kylo stood, opening his eyes to meet the glare of his master. He refused to allow his eyes to wander to the bodies that lay in his wake.

“It is done,” Kylo announced, devoid of emotion, his voice nearly as robotic as his eventual mask. Snoke closed his eyes, breathing in the darkness that surrounded them.

“It is, indeed.”

The memory faded again to a throne room. Snoke sat in front of what had become the Knights of Ren.

“Kylo Ren, I see in you something truly special - the potential of your bloodline. You have killed all other warriors who could have contended with you, but to become master of the Knights of Ren, you must prove your worthiness by defeating your fellow Knights. You must prove your insurmountable strength in the Force. There is only one opponent left for you to face. Let the darkness guide you through this final test. Show him how powerful... how capable... how merciless the son of darkness can be.”

Kylo turned obediently to face the other Knight. It was Jacen. Rey knew she would soon receive the answer to her questions regarding what happened to Jacen. She was overwhelmed by darkness
as he readied his stance, his blue lightsaber poised to strike. There was a part of Kylo that did not want to face his friend, knowing that the lethality of his blade could cause accidental injury in their fight. He had already split open Kyp's shoulder with his carelessness. But he knew the inner turmoil – devouring him alive inside since the moment he was born – would never stop until he completed his training and found peace. Luke had tried to save him with the light, but he had failed. Snoke had promised him peace if he surrendered to the darkness, and that was his last hope. If he had to injure his closest friend to do it, so be it.

Determination flashed across Jacen’s face as he prepared himself. Kylo did not hesitate. He quickly closed the distance between them, forcing Jacen to stagger backward off-balance, fear replacing the determination. In every duel she had witnessed, Kylo – and Ben – had charged his opponents, overwhelming them with offensive strikes. On Starkiller, he had waited for her to make the first move. Everything about the fight was nothing like she saw from him in his memories.

She felt her bondmate's confidence; he was keenly aware of his friend’s weaknesses. Jacen responded in fury by taking the offensive, but his strikes were lazily and adeptly blocked by Kylo, who tauntingly rolled his weapon in a flourish as he chewed his lip to suppress a smirk. Kylo toyed with him as a lothcat toyed with its prey. Jacen became increasingly frustrated.

He may have been on the offensive, but he did not control the battle. Jacen lunged where Kylo wanted him to lunge, where he purposely left himself open. Then he would shift out of the way, allowing Jacen to stumble forward, carried by his own momentum. Kylo could have taken half a dozen chances to attack an exposed flank, but he waited patiently for Jacen to right himself, and the game would begin again. Rey knew Kylo could have ended the fight quickly, but he chose to agitate and embarrass his friend instead. Jacen was red with fury, but he was weakening in exhaustion.

“Enough, Kylo Ren,” Snoke instructed blithely.

With the command, darkness surged inside him, and Kylo swiftly became the aggressor. He swung his lightsaber down forcefully upon Jacen, as he had in the training fight she had witnessed, but this time the other knight remained on his feet. Jacen had clearly been training extensively for this moment. But Kylo was, unfortunately for him, stronger.

His strikes were destructive, dominant, fierce, and unforgiving. Though Jacen did his best at parrying and blocking Kylo’s powerful strikes, he could not gain control of the duel. He was pivoting and backstepping defensively, which only seemed to encourage Kylo’s confidence. Kylo overwhelmed him with several quick slashes at varying heights before flipping his grip on the lightsaber and slashing across Jacen’s midsection, burning his clothing.

Jacen’s eyes widened as he realized how close his friend had come to taking his life.
Kylo thrust the lightsaber at his abdomen, forcing him to stumble back. Off balance, he blocked the next few strikes as best he could, but Kylo could sense his weakening with predatory accuracy. He swung wide at his friend’s throat, using the momentum to quickly rotate and crash the lightsaber down upon him with incredible velocity.

Their blue lightsabers – the embodiment of peace and hope – clashed as Jacen’s arms stretched high above his head, leaving him with little leverage. Kylo disengaged his lightsaber as his hand shot out with manipulation of the Force. He jerked Jacen forward violently, using his friend’s own momentum against him. As Jacen fell forward onto the obsidian floor, the lightsaber clattered from his grasp. Kylo stood over his friend, his cerulean lightsaber reignited and humming at his throat as Jacen turned over in surrender.

“Yes...” Snoke hissed. “Now finish him.”

Kylo blinked rapidly, emerging from his trance-like state, his eyes raised to his master in disbelief. Snoke was grinning cruelly. “Darth Plagueis once said, "Tell me what you regard as your greatest strength, so I will know how to best undermine you; tell me your greatest fear, so I will know which I must force you to face; tell me what you cherish most, so I will know what to take from you; and tell me what you crave, so I may deny you." That, Kylo Ren, is how you give yourself to the dark side. You must first sacrifice everything before you can rise to power in darkness. Before you can become as powerful as Lord Vader. Do it. Finish him.”

_This is how Snoke intended to complete his training, by taking away the closest thing Ben feels he has to family. Ben wouldn’t do it, he couldn’t, but Ben is gone. Kylo will do anything, kill anyone, to find peace._

Kylo’s stomach dropped in understanding, grief tightening in his throat. He slowly lowered his stare back down to his friend. The fear in Jacen’s blue eyes reflected his own. Rey sensed Kylo's loyalty surface through the fear. It gave her hope.

_I was right. There’s still light in you. I can feel it. But is there enough? Ben, please don’t do it..._

Kylo’s voice echoed in her mind. _I can’t do it._ He deactivated his lightsaber.

“He would be more useful alive, as an asset in battle,” Kylo said indifferently, turning from his friend to casually inspect his lightsaber. He hoped his performance was convincing, though his inner emotions did not reflect his tone. He summoned Jacen’s lightsaber, with an ease as if he
called his own, and offered it to him in an outstretched hand. It was effortless, as if they shared…

_A bond_, Rey realized.

Jacen struggled to his feet and snatched the weapon from his grasp.

Rey understood that Snoke had intended for Jacen’s death to complete Ben’s training. He knew taking the person who meant the most to Ben would complete his path to darkness. But Ben couldn’t do it. He must have hoped the same for Han, but it only made him more conflicted.

_But that means… if he thought my death would complete Ben’s training, he had to believe I… meant something to Ben. No, not just something._

_Everything._

It didn’t make sense. How could Snoke have been so wrong? Why had he even bonded them in the first place? How could he have known she would fall for the lies? Her thoughts were interrupted by a warning in the Force.

Kylo had turned to address Snoke, and he caught the sight of blue in his peripheral vision. His hand shot up instinctively to block whatever he sensed was moving toward him. With the threat temporarilily neutralized, Kylo turned to face it. A bright, blinding blue obscured his vision. Bright, blinding blue _plasma_. The arc of the blade had been stalled only centimeters from his hand. The blade had been aimed for his throat, intended to kill.

The blade disappeared back into its hilt, revealing the Knight who had betrayed him. Hot tears burned in his eyes as he stared into Jacen’s; once a striking icy blue, now a piercing, fiery yellow. Evil. Nothing reflected in those pools of darkness. His best friend, his brother, had tried to kill him as he stood defenseless. Jacen was the last person he cared for. His friend had betrayed him after Kylo spared his life. It was in that moment that he swore he would never let anyone close enough to hurt him again.

She had thought the worst thing that could have happened to Kylo would be losing Jacen in death. She was wrong. This. This was how he had become the hardened and callous Kylo Ren. This was why Snoke allowed Jacen to live. Kylo was suffering, hiding a wound so profound that it would never heal, not when he was too fearful to allow the only remedy to heal it. He wasn’t so different from her, she realized. They refused to let anyone past the mask and armor they wore to protect
themselves from further disappointment and pain. It was easier to keep everyone at arm’s length than lose people to death, abandonment, or betrayal. At least it had been, before the bond had torn everything away until all they could be with one another was themselves.

And they had betrayed the sanctity of that bond.

*Ben, I’m so sorry.*

A new memory emerged. Kylo was kneeling in a cold, dark chamber.

“This is your final task on your path to darkness. You will bleed your crystal, dominate it, force the Kyber to obey your command. You will demonstrate your loyalty to the dark side, the First Order, and to me. You will not leave this cell until you have proven your faithfulness to the First Order, and proven your worthiness as my apprentice,” Snoke commanded.

“Yes, master,” Kylo said. The door shut and he flinched, dragging himself off the floor to stare down at the lightsaber he had created under Luke’s tutelage. He triggered the ignition switch, inspecting the familiar bright blue hue of his weapon. Rey could sense the strong bond he carried with the crystal, a bond he would have to break and subjugate. It was entirely unnecessary; the crystal did not respond to either the darkness or light – it would respond to him no matter how he used the Force.

*This is it,* he realized. To bleed the crystal was to bleed his soul. Destroying the bond would destroy *him*. There would be no coming back from that, but he believed he was already too far gone. His hands trembled as he disengaged the weapon, the sigh that escaped his lips stuttered with fear. Before he could change his mind, he made quick work of disassembling the outer housing in the hilt, revealing an inner chamber that contained the functioning components of the lightsaber.

Rey recognized basic circuitry and energizers, a chamber containing a Kyber crystal, and the power cell. It was built similarly to Luke’s severed weapon, which she had spent hours inspecting over the past few weeks. Kylo carefully removed the pale blue Kyber crystal and turned it over in his fingers. Rey could feel the warm strength attached to the bond between Kylo and that crystal. Its vibrations in the Force were attuned perfectly to his – its frequency sang the intricate song of his very soul. It had called to him, had been fated to align with his powerful Force signature. It was the single most significant relationship to a Jedi.

An overwhelming sorrow consumed him as he contemplated the loss of a deep, intimate, trusted part of himself. The only bond in his life not poisoned by betrayal. But it would be. And he would be the cause. Rey craved the bond with a crystal that would become an extension of herself, so she
understood the devastation of what Kylo had been asked to do. She had seen his weapon. She knew what he had done. But to witness it was... heartbreaking.

Kylo gathered the Force around him. He allowed the anger, fear, and pain – feelings of betrayal, abandonment, and loss of control – to build inside him, twisting in volatility as the unstable battle of light versus darkness raged in his soul. He concentrated on his connection to the Force, his connection to his Kyber crystal, and imposed his deepest pain onto the bond.

Rey screamed in response to the splitting pain she felt through Kylo as he tortured the crystal in domination, in turn torturing himself, imposing his will upon their trusted connection. Rey could feel the Kyber resist, attempting to oppose the betrayal that was destroying their bond, but Kylo had become nothing but willpower and determination. The act was rending a fracture in his soul he knew he could never heal; the bond would be irrevocably damaged by the unnecessary subjugation.

Kylo cried out into the chamber as the pain burned within him, tears streaming down his cheeks as he forced himself to continue the torture. His body shook violently with exhaustion, the psychological agony so intense that he straddled the border of unconsciousness. He imposed his superiority with brutal might, infused his pain into it, but the crystal was equally matched in power and refused to surrender.

He continued in single-mindedness to sever the connection instead, ripping and tearing through the deepest parts of himself. The torture had reached the limit of the pain he could withstand – an unstoppable Force meeting an immovable object in the most literal sense. There was a desperate plea, an appeal made from the depths of his being, to end the violence and save his soul. Rey begged through tears for the torment to end; the agony had become unbearable to endure, and she did not even share the bond with the crystal that he had. Kylo pictured the death and betrayal that had led him down that path. Using that pain, he cried out with one last effort.

Something snapped, a searing pain forcing him to his knees. It felt as if a vacuum had sucked the air from the cell. He gasped for breath as he fought to remain conscious. It was done. He opened his hand, expecting to see his crystal tainted in a red hue. Though it had bled as he had desired, there was a deep fracture that splintered down its length. Rather than severing the bond, he had only damaged it beyond repair – the connection vibrated in tormented betrayal. The act had not solidified his heart to darkness. No, he felt as fractured and defeated as his crystal.

Rey cried for him. Mourning, she realized, the death of Ben Solo. Kylo believed that he had killed Ben the night at the temple, but she could feel the damage he had done by bleeding his crystal. That soul-splitting torment was the true end to the Ben he had once been. It was the past. Rey knew she could not change it, but it provided her little comfort that she could have done nothing. She thought she could save him, help him become the man that he once was, but he had done damage that was beyond repair. She thought she would be angry at him for being so foolish, but all
she felt was sorrow for the loss of the man he could have been. And beyond that, she knew one thing – she would never allow him to try to sever their bond again.

A new memory emerged.

Kylo and the others were standing inside a dark cavern.

No, not a cavern, Rey realized. A temple.

Dust and ash covered the cracked floor. Statues, columns, and sections of walls carved top-to-bottom with symbols laid in crumbled ruins of stone. There was not a single opening that allowed light to penetrate the darkness there. A crimson glow was cast onto a point in the center of the room by nearly a half dozen lightsabers. Nearly, because Kylo was standing weaponless. Rey sensed from his agitated thoughts that his weapon was not functional; he was struggling with containing the heat released by the cracked crystal. His mind was lightyears away as he tried to find a solution so he wouldn't further disappoint Snoke.

There was a large crater in the stone floor, and, as Kylo shifted closer, the chasm revealed the reflective shimmer of the largest Kyber crystal Rey had ever seen. It was then that she understood that he was standing on the same forsaken planet he had once stood upon when he had been "Ben." He stood in a semi-circle with the others, in an image reminiscent of the one they had stood in their last mission together when they were still loyal to the Jedi Order. This time, their new dark attire matched the darkness that consumed their hearts. This time, they surrounded the holo of their so-called master who had tortured and tormented them. And this time, Kylo had not been left behind for the mission.

“You have made it through the complex trials and puzzles that have shrouded this temple in mystery for thousands of years. You have succeeded where Luke and the other Jedi had failed. Luke was ruled by fear in the face of true power, and by leaving Kylo Ren – the strongest in the Force – behind, he compromised the mission. Fear... vanity... failure is the legacy of the Jedi. This,” the hologram of Snoke gestured lazily to the room, “is the legacy of the Sith. They were too consumed by greed and revenge to survive their own weapon. But with the threat of this weapon you have discovered, we will bring the New Republic to its knees. The Republic has failed you all differently, but you will all have your retribution for it. We will bring order and justice to the galaxy; no one will suffer what you each have suffered. They will bow to your power. And it all begins with this weapon. The Empire had their Death Star, but what we have discovered here will make that weapon seem like a child's toy.”

Kylo stared at the ancient text in his hands. He held the secrets to creating something greater than the Death Star. His mind was not focused on power, however, but the destruction of another Alderaan. Kylo had witnessed the effects of that destruction; he had witnessed how his mother had
suffered. He had wondered if that was the moment his mother had changed into someone who would sacrifice anything to prevent that from ever happening again, including neglecting her own family. For years, he had blamed Vader and the Empire for taking his mother from him that day as much as they had taken those lost on the planet. But Snoke wouldn't destroy a planet, would he? *That* was not order.

The yawning abyss that housed the weapon stretched to the edge of his boot. He could drop the plans, and the text would be lost forever to the depths of darkness. Something inside him screamed to loosen his fingers on the grip, implored him to see the consequences if a weapon of that magnitude was operational. Could anyone be trusted with this absolute power in their hands? Kylo believed *he* could, but whose hands would the text fall into if it left the temple?

“Kylo Ren stays,” Snoke’s holoprojection said, staring at Kylo, “the other Knights return to the surface.” As the others followed the maze of passageways back the way they had come, their crimson lightsabers disappeared into darkness. Kylo turned to his master.

Snoke studied him for a long moment. “Do you remember the story of the poisonous Porcuspine and the aquatic Gundark?”

“A child’s story, master,” Kylo answered. “The Porcuspine asked for help, but stung the Gundark in the middle of the river because it was his nature.”

“And what is your nature, Kylo Ren?”

Kylo wasn’t certain what the correct answer should be. “Master?”

Snoke’s smile crept across his face. “I feel your conflict with the light. It is tempting you.” It was ironic, he thought, that at the same temple, one master could believe he was tempted by too much darkness, and the other believed he was tempted by too much light. Kylo cursed both the powerful light and darkness that flowed through his veins.

“I can feel it again,” Kylo admitted, knowing that a lie was futile. “But I will not be seduced by its weakness, master.” He tightened his grip on the book, stepping away from the temptation of the vast crevice.

Snoke ignored his words, choosing to push his energy into Kylo’s mind instead. Searching. Interpreting. Manipulating. “Do you see that the Jedi Order must be eliminated?”
“Yes, master.” There was no conflict Rey could sense in his words. He truly believed it.

“And you know the Jedi are the extension of the New Republic,” Snoke continued. “They are just as flawed, just as culpable. They took parents from their children. And they have nothing to show for it. Do you see that the New Republic is a failure as extensive as the Jedi Order? They need to be stopped to bring order to the galaxy.”

“Yes, master.” Kylo hesitated, only for a split second, but it was enough for Rey to notice. And Snoke.

“Then what is the conflict I sense in you?” Snoke pushed deeper into his thoughts, but Kylo altered his thoughts subtly. It seemed intentional, as if he was planting thoughts for Snoke to find. After what had occurred in the throne room, Rey believed he was doing just that.

His answer, however, was truthful. “The weapon, master.”

“The galaxy cannot save itself,” Snoke reminded him. “It will not bend to our will without cause. The weapon is required to contain the chaos, bring order through the threat of power. Don’t fear. What would be left to control if we destroyed it all? Construction has already begun, this is merely the final key. You will become the operative member of the weapons’ triumvirate command with General Hux and Captain Phasma. But do not concern yourself with them, only you and I will have final command over the weapon, young apprentice. It is merely a tool in our plan to gain power.” It was only then that she realized what that weapon would become, what it would destroy. And Kylo had once held the key to it all – millions of lives in the balance – over a pit of darkness.

“For now,” Snoke continued, “your mission is to expand our hold in the uncharted territories. I will introduce you to the Attendants who will help you navigate the Unknown Region. We must first control the hermetic kingdoms there, and quell the uprisings, starting with Tehar. We must have a strong presence in the uncharted region to successfully mount a strong enough offensive against the New Republic. The Knights will join you on subsequent conquests after they have returned the superweapon plans to me.”

Kylo lowered his eyes to conceal his disappointment. “What about Skywalker?”

“All in good time.” The holo flickered and disappeared without parting words, casting the temple into darkness.
“Yes, master,” Kylo answered to the empty room.

Without the aid of his lightsaber, Kylo lit a glowrod to help navigate around the pit containing the crystal, and into the passageway where he paused to admire his handiwork in solving the final puzzle. Kylo had done it, Rey realized. He had been the one to do what the others before him had not. Kylo was more powerful than even she had believed. Somehow, Snoke had known that Kylo would make the difference in the war, long before anyone else had recognized his potential.

*What would have happened, Rey wondered, if Luke had trusted him on their mission here? Would the plans have still ended up in Snoke's hands? Or would that one decision have changed the war?*

As Kylo stooped in the narrow passageway, his boot kicked an object hidden in the debris. He called it to his hand, recognizing the dark shape for what it was – a lightsaber. It was shaped in a crossguard configuration, an ancient design he had only seen in history holobooks. He triggered the blade, but it did not ignite.

Kylo nearly dropped the useless weapon, but he was struck with an idea. It would benefit him twofold. The crossguard design could fix the instability concern with his lightsaber, channeling the unstable heat through the vents. Then there was his uncle. His mission was to find Luke, eventually, and, when he did, he would have to face the man who nearly succeeded in killing him. If he could alter the hilt to fit his own lightsaber...Luke would *know* where the weapon originated. Kylo could show his uncle the consequence of underestimating him, striking fear into the Jedi as he had done to him. He would succeed where Luke had failed.

He trusted his master; he would lead the campaign in the Unknown Regions until the First Order became a viable threat. That would certainly draw his uncle out of hiding. He would bide his time and wait, years if he had to. The galaxy was a vast place, but how long could Luke possibly stay missing? If Luke was too much of a coward to finish what he started, then Kylo would force his hand.

*Yes, all in good time.*

A new but familiar memory emerged. Kylo was standing in a torrential downpour on a planet foreign to her, but she plucked the name Yashuvhu from his thoughts. His darkness was heavier than she had ever felt in him, with his crackling crossguard lightsaber in his hand and the Knights of Ren at his side. She could feel his simmering agitation. By all accounts, battle was his element, it *calmed* him. She couldn’t find a reason for the turmoil until he turned his mask to the sky.
“I hate rain,” he growled. The other Knights didn’t respond, but it was low enough that it was likely lost in the deluge. Rey had connected with him twice in the rains on Ahch-To and once on Kamino, but she had never heard him direct this seething malice toward it before. It wasn’t until she saw the flashes of his memories of a burning temple in his thoughts that she understood; rain reminded him of that night. Why hadn’t she noticed his torment that night in the hut, or as he stood on the edge of that cliff? She had recognized the light and compassion in him when he had seen her pain and empathized, but had she seen his?

Rey watched him struggle with the anger – attempting to dominate his pain like an opponent – so he could successfully complete his mission. His mind was singularly focused; everything he did and planned to do was with the ultimate goal of killing his uncle and ending the Jedi Order. His role with the First Order was partly due to misguided ideals, but predominantly, it was a means to an end. She wondered what his purpose had become now that Luke Skywalker was dead.

Certainly, there were few ties that pulled him to the First Order other than that original purpose. Luke was dead, Snoke was dead, and what camaraderie he may have once held with the other Knights had been lost to the cruelty and manipulation of Snoke’s training. The love she had felt between the students at the Jedi temple was gone, the bonds having faded to nothing. They would have been a stronger unit had the bonds remained, but she knew from experience that Snoke was too fearful of loyalty to anyone but him. Kylo was surrounded by people who had once been his family, but he was emotionally isolated.

Curiously, the others were not wielding lightsabers, but other seemingly effective weapons, some that Rey had never seen before. At first, she believed that their lightsabers were simply not drawn, following Kylo’s lead. Perhaps the other weapons were a necessity to their battle plans. It was his distrust and paranoia as he carefully watched their movements in his limited peripherals that gave her cause to think otherwise. Perhaps that was why she had never seen the Knights of Ren. Perhaps Snoke had feared them standing together against him, so he divided them. Or perhaps Kylo’s paranoia had formed from Jacen’s betrayal – perhaps he trusted no one.

“You are in no position to negotiate,” Kylo said flatly to a group of men clad in armor standing before him. The vocal modifier in his mask sent a shiver of familiarity down her spine.

“We will never bow to the First Order! We’d rather die than allow you into those mines!” a villager shouted defiantly as he raised his sword, his face obscured through the immense downpour.

“That can be arranged,” Kylo responded, striking out abruptly, separating the man’s head from his shoulders with a brutal swing. The other villagers shouted in unison as they besieged the Knights. Without an ounce of fear, he channeled the darkness and engaged them.
The crystal still called to him through the bond, but Kylo forced his will upon it – compelling it to obey rather than opening himself to the bond so it could answer willingly. It was physically and psychologically draining to dominate it – not to mention unnecessary – and Rey realized that was what Kylo suffered every time he used his lightsaber.

*Is that why he wanted Luke's lightsaber?*

It had been a slaughter – the men who stood against the Knights were no match for the weapons and skill of the fallen Jedi. Rey watched one Knight sever a man in two with a long sword. Another Knight used a blaster rifle to swiftly cut down an entire group. One of the smaller Knights had some type of flamethrower that drove the men to his will. Kylo was *counting* the people who fell to his weapon.

The battle was quickly falling into their favor, with a single combatant remaining. The villager had turned away from the Knights closing in upon him, however, raising his sword to a figure on the ground. Kylo wasn’t certain why the villager would kill someone on *his* side – as the fallen lifeform certainly wasn’t a Knight – but Kylo would allow the villagers to kill themselves if that was their desire. He would have, if there wasn’t a warning in the Force that terrified Kylo for reasons he couldn’t explain. He stepped up behind the villager and impaled the lightsaber through the man's chest before he could strike.

The rain distorted the figure on the ground, but Rey knew immediately who it was. She had seen this before, in a vision, from the viewpoint of the girl scrambling to get away. Kylo was momentarily taken aback, the darkness inside him abating as he sensed the girl's strong Force signature. Something about her seemed oddly familiar to him. Kylo moved toward her, dozens of questions burning in his mind, but the girl disappeared as he reached her.

“Who are you?” he shouted into the rain, finding nothing as he reached out into the Force in search of her.

“What was that?” a mechanical voice said as a Knight stepped up next to him. Even behind the voice modulator, she recognized Kyp’s voice. “A manipulation by Snoke?”

“No,” Kylo replied with certainty, surveying the deadly scene around them. “This was... *something else.*” A whisper deep inside him told him he would see the girl again. He knew from the depths beyond where the darkness could reach that this girl would be important.

*It wasn't just a vision,* Rey realized. He had seen her, despite it occurring years before she ever left Jakku. *Somehow, across time and space, I was there. But why? Of all the moments for us to meet,*
why bring me back to that one? Why not bring me to the moment before Luke ignited that lightsaber? I don't understand. I never had a chance to change anything.

As if on cue, Kylo's comm beeped. Removing it from his pocket, a hologram of Snoke appeared.

“Kylo Ren, your report?” Snoke said it more like a statement than a question, as if he would not accept anything less.

Kylo considered telling him about the girl, but he swallowed it. It was the first time Rey had witnessed Kylo deceiving him. “The mission was successful, master.”

Snoke was quiet for a moment, waiting for Kylo to reveal more. It was clear through his thoughts that Kylo was conflicted about concealing the information from his master. He feared Snoke expected more, but he was not forthcoming. She’d influenced him, even back then. Why? Why had his connection to her caused him to stray – even temporarily – from his path? She wondered if Snoke had felt it then too. “The campaign in the Unknown regions has been an overwhelming success,” the creature drawled. “The troops can finish with the remaining systems... I have an important mission for one of your Knights.”

“Master?”

“The Resistance is expanding under the command of Leia Organa.” Kylo's stomach churned at the aching familiarity of a name he hoped he would never have to hear again. “They are attempting to find the map to Skywalker. We have recovered a navigational chart from the archives of the Empire, but we have discovered Lor San Tekka has a section that contains the rest. We must find the last section before the Resistance does. You know what will happen if Luke Skywalker returns. Choose a capable Knight to spare for this mission, and you will return to my side for training to face Skywalker.”

It was everything he had been waiting for. Training to kill his uncle was his only true mission. “Yes, master.” He had never questioned their assignments before, but he couldn’t stop wondering about the girl who had appeared in the Force. He knew there was a reason the Force showed her to him. It couldn’t be a coincidence that it occurred seconds before he heard his mother’s name again. Something deep inside him – an intuition he had repressed long ago – told him he should be the one chosen for the mission, even if he wanted nothing more than to train in preparation to kill his uncle once and for all, even if he wanted to stay as far from Leia and the Resistance as possible.

No, he had never questioned their assignments before, but he had never hidden anything important from his master, either. Something had changed inside him when he saw her, and he knew he had
to be the one to find that map. If he asked Snoke to send him instead, if he reminded his master of
the importance that map held to him, he knew he would be denied. Kylo formulated a different
strategy. “This mission should be my mission, master. I should be the one to retrieve the map and
bring it to you. I trust no one else with the whereabouts of Skywalker.” He knew the others heard
his admission; he didn’t care. He needed Snoke to change his mind, and Snoke rarely did anything
that wasn’t thoroughly considered and deliberate.

“I suppose I can suspend your training to entrust this to you, Kylo Ren, but do not fail me. You will
be tested,” his master sighed. “San Tekka’s last known whereabouts is the planet Pillio in the Jinata
system. You will start there, then tear apart this entire galaxy until you find him. Bring...
Skywalker… to me.” The holo of Snoke disappeared, leaving Kylo alone in the rain. This was it.
This was what he had waited years for, but he would not obey his master.

*I will not bring him back to Snoke. This ends when I find him. He dies, or I take him down with
me.*

He had made his first, small rebellion against Snoke. It was still made in darkness, his desires still
focused on power and revenge, but in doing so, he had chosen a path that had led him directly to
her. And he had done it all because a vision he had seen of *her*. It didn’t make sense. If he had seen
her in a vision before they met, why hadn’t he said anything? Though, to be fair, she hadn’t said
anything about the visions *she* had seen, either.

Rey felt her connection to the vision fracturing. His presence tried to force her out, but she held on.
She wanted to know more, wanted to understand his loyalty to Snoke and what Snoke had done to
him. As the Force was wont to do, it answered.

Instead of revealing the most consequential memories, as it had before, the memories moved into
overdrive, the emotions hitting her full force. One memory after another crashed into her – time no
longer relevant – she watched and felt the years of physical and psychological torture by Snoke.
Kylo was so impassioned by the rhetoric regarding his grandfather, and his sharpened hatred for his
uncle, that he didn’t see Snoke’s motives as they began to change.

But Rey did.

In the beginning, Snoke believed Kylo, as a Skywalker, would be the one to destroy Luke and the
Jedi. As time wore on, however, Snoke sensed his true power. He seemed to decide the entire
Skywalker line was a threat, especially Kylo. The very thing he wanted – for Kylo to become his
grandfather – became his greatest fear. The balanced light and darkness that had drawn Snoke to
him became his greatest nemesis.
Kylo could have done everything for Snoke, and it would never have been enough. Snoke would have used Kylo until he killed Luke and then would have disposed of him in his own fear, but Kylo didn’t see it. The torment that Snoke wrought upon him in his jealousy and fear was only seen as training to Kylo. Every day, he was hit with Force lightning, choked, compelled to his knees or whatever manipulation of the Force Snoke decided to use until he was submissive, humiliated, and on edge. Every day, Snoke had pried into Kylo’s mind, as he had done with Rey on the *Supremacy*, tearing through every memory that gave him hope. Every day, Kylo was demeaned and humiliated, his own thoughts used against him. Every day, Snoke endlessly whispered his manipulative script into Kylo’s head.

She felt it gradually break him down until there was nothing left but an empty shell of who he used to be. By the end, he stopped fighting back against the abuse. He welcomed the physical pain. He adapted to the psychological torture, learning how to perform it himself in the process. The manipulative and demeaning words became his own thoughts. The repulsive graze of Snoke’s fingers upon his skin never lost its nauseating reaction, but he covered every inch of his body so he would never have to feel the sensation of touch again. He learned to feel nothing – emotionally and physically. Still, it was never enough for Snoke.

She watched how Snoke had slowly broken the last pieces of his brotherly bond with Jacen, as well as his relationship with the other Knights, relentlessly provoking envy, rivalry, and resentment through competition and constant comparison between them. Snoke had used the last bond Kylo had left against him. Jacen may not have killed him, but something inside him died after the day of Jacen’s betrayal.

Kylo’s hope of peace was always just slightly out of reach. He gave everything he had to the dark side, yet it had never been good enough.

*You have too much of your father’s heart in you...You are just a child in a mask... You will never be Darth Vader...* echoed endlessly in his mind.
Warning! This chapter and the following chapters are very dark chapters. Rey is reliving some of Kylo's darkest memories. If you're concerned about a trigger, it is likely in here. There is graphic violence, many characters deaths, physical torture, psychological torture, grooming of a young child, gaslighting, abuse, manipulation, you name it. If you have a specific trigger, it's better to play it safe and message me with concerns as there are many specific violent scenarios encountered here. Nothing written here is worth putting yourself through mental duress. I would be more than happy to piece together parts of the chapters or give a detailed overview as I understand they are important chapters.
Memories of a Monster

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story is 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You’ve been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
The memories became more intense, nightmarish in nature. And then...

Her.

Something in him changed the moment he saw her in the woods of Takodana. He had heard of this girl that had helped the traitor and the droid escape Jakku. He should have sought the droid with the map, but he was drawn to her. He had no reason to find her, but Rey felt his desperation to see her. His mind was focused on the girl, his hands trembling as he sensed for her energy in the Force. He seemed almost… excited to see her. It was the most alive he had felt since he left his uncle’s temple. He saw her, and he instantly knew she was the girl in the Force he had seen that night in the rain. Still, he was looking for more.
He wasn’t angry she fired at him with the blaster, but she sensed his confusion… and offense. As he stepped closer to her, he seemed interested that she recognized him, but was disappointed when he found nothing more than a vision in her thoughts. “You would kill me,” he had asked her, “knowing nothing about me?” The words took on a deeper meaning now that she knew he had seen her as well. His question was not only in offense; it was probing. He wanted her to confirm what she knew. He had expected her to know him.

*I know everything I need to know about you,* she had told him once in the rain. His hopeful – and then disappointed – response on Ahch-To began to make more sense.

His curiosity and desire to toy with her fell away the more he interacted with her, because the darkness inside her intrigued him. He was impressed by the strength of her energy and her fearlessness in firing upon him. He was accustomed to others running from him, not fighting back with the ferocity he had felt in her. She sensed his surprise that someone not aligned with darkness would use it indiscriminately. His thoughts already focused on discovering more about her, along with a desire to train her, but there was something else underneath. It was as if his light was already attempting to connect to hers, as if the bond already existed.

*That’s impossible, isn’t it?*

“How wouldn’t I kill you? I know about the First Order,” she had challenged. Rey wished she could return to that day, ask him the questions that burned in her mind now. Who was she to him?

“I would say otherwise. But that is a small thing. Simple ignorances are easily remedied.”

She could feel him sense her terror at being unable to move, she could feel his darkness feed off it. “So afraid… yet I should be the one who should be scared. You shot first. You speak of the Order as if it were barbaric. And yet, it is I who was forced to defend myself against you.” There was something in her mind that he was searching for, but it wasn’t the map. He discovered that she had seen it, but his search continued, focused on memories when she was young. On *dreams.* She knew now that he couldn’t have killed her parents, so that wasn’t it; what was he looking for?

The memory fractured without answering her questions, and another, darker, memory took its place.
“Ben!” a gruff voice shouted, stilling his escape down a skyway.

No.

Kylo didn’t have to turn to know whose face would be staring back at him. He could feel the familiar energy calling him to remember its importance. He momentarily considered walking away, allowing the stormtroopers to handle him. But Snoke... he had to face his father, prove his selflessness and loyalty to the Order; he knew the time would come eventually. This was his chance to finally prove his worthiness as Vader’s grandson. He swallowed apprehensively, turning to face his father. He hoped Han could not hear his breath hitch in his throat at the sight of him. It was a dagger to his heart.

“Han Solo,” he said as confidently as he could muster, though terror scratched and gnawed under his skin. Seeing his father’s face immediately transformed him into a young, weak little boy again, but he refused to allow his father to see that weakness. Kylo was grateful Han was not a Force-sensitive. “I’ve been waiting for this day for a long time.”

His confidence waned as his father stepped closer, forcing him to engage him further.

*Please don’t. Please go. Don't you understand what I have to do? Just leave. You're good at it.*

He waited as his father approached, acutely aware of the eyes of the First Order scrutinizing his every move. His father was backing him into a corner, and he could do nothing to stop it.

Rey’s throat clenched in anguish as she noticed the shuddering breath Han exhaled as he looked upon his son, the tears reflecting in his eyes as he hesitantly walked toward the boy he had failed. But Kylo only focused on his father’s commanding posture as the space between them disappeared. Kylo forced himself to stand tall in response; back straight, head high, shoulders squared, intimidating only in posture as he faced the man whose approval he had spent a childhood yearning for. He may have looked the part, but he wanted to shrink away in shame.

“Take off that mask; you don't need it,” his father demanded. Kylo could feel his resolve melting away under the older man’s imposing presence.

“What do you think you'll see if you do?” he mocked petulantly, echoing their last conversation when his father had left him, refusing to look at him. He wished his father refused to look at him this time.
"I'm a monster; remember, old man?"

“The face of my son,” came the heated reply. Kylo drew in the Force to stop his knees from giving out from under him.

No. You don't get to say things like that. It's years too late for that. I'm not your son. You left me. You're dead to me, remember? I'm dead to you.

He wanted nothing more than to tell Han Solo where he could shove his demand, but his trembling fingers pressed the release of his mask instead. Years of training under Snoke, and he bent to his father's will in seconds. He used the self-loathing to drown his weakness in darkness.

Kylo hadn't considered what he expected of his father's reaction, but he hadn't expected to see him so...emotional. He could hear his father's broken gasp, could see the agony in his father's eyes as he looked upon his face for the first time in over a decade. His chest clenched in return, but he turned the pain into strength.

“Your son is gone,” he managed, his voice strange to his own ears as he attempted to suppress the emotions bubbling in his throat. “He was weak and foolish like his father, so I destroyed him.”

You destroyed him.

The rage inside him screamed at him to say it, but he wouldn't allow his father to know how profoundly his betrayal had broken him. It was necessary that Han Solo realized how strong and powerful he had become.

“That's what Snoke wants you to believe,” his father dared.

Now you care about what Snoke wants me to believe? Now? Where was this advice when I was eight years old and struggling with the whispers in my head?

“But it's not true,” Han continued. “My son is alive.”
If only it were that simple. Your son has been gone for years. You left me to be murdered by Luke. There's no going back now.

He hadn't even contemplated his next words before they flowed with practiced ease from his lips. “No, the Supreme Leader is wise.”

“No, the Supreme Leader is wise.” Han reasoned gruffly, continuing to step closer to his son. “When he gets what he wants, he'll crush you.”

No. He is the only one who believed in me. He would never betray me. He needs me.

But Kylo knew his words were empty, and his father knew he knew it; he could see it in his eyes as he moved closer. Too close. His tone was too gentle. His eyes were too caring. The yearning he had felt his entire life to be the son his father wanted returned with a painful ache. Kylo wanted to maintain his impassive façade, but it was crumbling. The darkness was fading. He stepped back against his will. “You know it's true.”

He did. Everything in him knew it was true. They were the truest words his father had ever spoken. Snoke had only ever used him – everyone had – and one day he would outlive his usefulness. But what was he supposed to do? He had made his choice. He couldn't be the son that Han knew. Han had never wanted that boy anyway. Ben Solo was truly gone.

It was too late. He wished he could go back, be a pilot as he had always wanted. Be free. But it didn't matter anymore. Snoke might kill him if he stayed, but he would destroy him if he left. His master was eternally in his head; he could make Kylo suffer in ways infinitely more terrifying than death. Kylo had sold his soul to the darkness in exchange for power and revenge; there was no coming back from that. He didn’t want to come back from that. “It's too late,” he said. It sickened him that his voice trembled in heartache, but it tormented him to admit it aloud.

“No, it's not. Leave here with me. Come home. We miss you.” When he lay awake every single night at the Jedi temple, he imagined his father coming back for him and saying those very words. He had imagined it more times than he could count as he fell in deeper under Snoke’s oversight, but, more importantly, he had heard it before in his training with Snoke, spoken by the illusion of his father.

Ben, it’s not too late. I miss you. Your mother misses you. You're not a monster or a burden. We know you can be good. I’m sorry we lied to you about your grandfather and left you alone with Luke. But I’ve come back for you like I promised I would. Come home. I’ll help you, son.
When Kylo had faced the choice before, he killed the illusion, but everything inside him screamed to trust the man standing in front of him. Could he do it? Could he trust a man who had lied and betrayed him? The mere thought of hurting this man – who looked upon him as Kylo always wished he had – caused bile to rise in his throat. No. He was too weak. He could not be the heir-apparent to Vader that Snoke had trained him to be, not if it meant doing this.

He couldn't hide the truth from his father, not when he saw the desperation in his eyes. “I'm being torn apart,” the truth was laced with despair as it tumbled from his quivering lips. “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. Will you help me?”

“Yes, anything.” The words stung more than his father could ever imagine.

Why now! His mind screamed.

Searching his father's eyes, he only found honesty. For a moment, Kylo imagined it was possible. He could fly away into the Wilds to live a simple life, Luke could wither away in obsoletion, Snoke could find another pet. He could be no one. He could be free.

Kylo dropped his helmet on the skyway, the weight of the galaxy falling away with it. He unclipped his lightsaber to offer it to his father, surrendering the fractured symbol of everything he had sacrificed to become Kylo Ren. He considered the weapon for a moment; the bond to the crystal was destroyed beyond repair, Ben Solo was destroyed beyond repair. What he had done, what he had lost... could he do it? Could he go back?

As he extended the lightsaber to his father, the whispers began.

Can you go back... After everything you have done... After everything they have done to you... You are a fool if you believe there is a home to go back to... If you leave, everything you've sacrificed will have been for nothing... He doesn't understand the darkness in you... And he's lying again... He knows you can't be saved... He knows you're too powerful... Why is he here now... Did he come for you... Or did he come for the girl... He never cared before...

Use your power... He laid explosives under your feet... Tell me, who is he here to stop... If not you... Don't forget, Ben Solo didn't heed my warnings... Ben Solo was too trusting... Ben Solo allowed himself to be betrayed... You can be something great, Kylo Ren...You can be stronger
than this weakness that draws you to him... You know he can’t leave here... He’s seen too much... Probe his mind...

Kylo’s fingers clenched around the weapon instinctively. The room darkened around them as the darkness flooded his veins. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, Kylo skimmed his father’s thoughts, knowing instinctively what he would find. It wasn’t difficult to locate; Han Solo may not have been weak-minded enough to succumb to Force persuasion, but his thoughts were still easily accessible. Kylo had wondered why the droid would trust a scavenger with the map, but what he hadn’t considered was that she was a witness in the room, not the intended target. The droid would have only trusted that map with the Resistance. Who better to trust than General Organa’s own – albeit estranged – husband?

Han Solo had seen the map; the mission ended on that skyway. He couldn't kill his father, but he would retrieve that map. If Snoke had Luke Skywalker, he wouldn’t care about Han Solo. Han began fighting back, however, complicating the extraction. In his desperation to keep the map from Kylo, thoughts spiraled through his mind chaotically. Kylo knew the pain Han would endure by fighting back. He may not have been there as he was growing up, he may have lied about his bloodline, he may have abandoned him when the darkness became too powerful... but he was his father. It hurt to hurt him.

Kylo would have taken the map if it wasn't fated that Han had been thinking about Leia at that moment. Particularly, a conversation they'd had before Han left with the traitor to rescue Rey and destroy Starkiller.

We lost our son, forever... Nausea twisted in the pit of his stomach. Han thought his own son was too far gone. Had he lied to him? When Kylo had said it was too late, had his father believed it too?

If Luke couldn't reach him, how could I? The nausea faded to anger. Of course, Luke couldn't reach him; he tried to kill him. How could his own father believe that the Jedi had given a valiant effort? If Han failed, would he try to kill him too?

How do we blow it up? There's always a way to do that. It was his suggestion to blow up Starkiller. The base he knew his son was stationed on. Kylo had his answer. Han had planned to kill him if he failed to turn him.

If you see our son, bring him home. It wasn't Han's idea, it was Leia's. Han wasn’t there for him, he was an afterthought. Infiltrate the enemy base, save the girl he just met, and blow up the base; that was his mission. If he saw his son, he would bring him home for Leia. If not, then he would let him die in the explosion. Snoke was right, his father didn't care. He was doing it for her. There it
was, the betrayal. Ben Solo was a fool.

*Never again*… he promised himself. The darkness smothered the naïve hope in his chest. His will to run, to fight, to save himself faded as the darkness consumed and tainted his thoughts.

*All you must do to find peace is sacrifice yourself to the darkness…*

Kylo wanted the pain to end, and with this sacrifice to darkness, he would find peace. He ripped away from his father’s mind, abandoning his pursuit of the map in his despair. His father may have seen the map, but Kylo didn’t need it from him. There was still Rey. His master had already known that; Kylo knew he never intended for him to take the time to draw it from his father on the skyway. Snoke only wanted him to *see* the truth.

Han’s hands were clenched around the hilt of the weapon, battling him physically as well, urging plaintively with increased pressure for him to release it. As the light of the sun disappeared, so did Kylo’s hope. There were only two ways to end the pain ripping him apart thread by thread. Either he turned the blade against his father, sacrificing himself to the darkness, or he turned the blade against himself, sacrificing himself to the Force. It would be so easy – to turn the blade against himself – force his father to witness what he had done to him long before that moment. The pain would end.

*Complete your training, fulfill your destiny. You know the truth…* the voice whispered. *You know what you have to do.*

The memory of those same words, spoken as he was encouraged to take Tionne’s life at the temple, brought back all the pain of that night… Tionne, Cade, Luke, Dev. There was no going back. Just as he had that night, Kylo knew the truth.

They were already surrounded by his personal squad of stormtroopers on a base with tens of thousands of personnel scrambling toward their position. His men would capture Han; they would torture him for the map. Snoke would likely command Kylo to torture his own father. Kylo had experienced enough of Snoke’s training to understand the torment Han would suffer. When they finally drove Han to his knees and executed him, it would be long after he begged for it. That final act of pain and suffering would be *mercy*, even if it lacked the dignity he deserved. The story of Han Solo would come to an end in some humiliating public display at the hands of someone who did not understand the weight of the life they were taking. The only chance Han had to escape off that base with his life was if Kylo helped him, but he knew he couldn’t leave. It was too late.

Resolutely, Kylo raised his eyes to search his father’s – to find the anger that would channel the
darkness. He only found love within them. In the end, it wasn’t hatred or anger or betrayal that
gave him the strength to do it. No, it was his love. For once, his father was exactly whom he
needed him to be, but it wouldn’t be enough.

Han's eyes widened. The split second before Kylo's thumb found the trigger, his father knew. His
face hardened in grim acceptance. It was an outcome he had already prepared for.

Rey jolted as the lightsaber crackled to life, painting their faces in a bloody hue.

Kylo thrust the plasma blade deeper into the man who had given him life, assuring Han's suffering
would end swiftly. He was flooded with relief and... peace. Kylo had done it – it was over. He had
finally found the strength to destroy the light, to end the conflict in his soul.

It was the selflessness Snoke spoke of often, the final peace that would complete his training; he
had sacrificed himself to the darkness by taking the life of his father, and, in doing so, he had
spared his father a fate worse than death. The deed had set them free. There was no need for
pretense, they both knew the wound was lethal. This was the end of the great Han Solo, of Kylo’s
torment, and he couldn’t have done it without his father’s help.

“Thank you,” he said. Kylo meant it. Han had offered to do anything to help him, and
inadvertently, he had. Kylo withdrew the saber to end his suffering, but his father would not die
peacefully. The blade had cut through the void created by years of good intentions,
misunderstanding, and regret – piercing through a hopeful father, and, in his final breaths, a hand of
forgiveness caressed a broken son’s cheek.

Kylo longed to look away, to give his father his last moment without being forced to stare into the
eyes of his murderer.

_His murderer_...

But his father's pained eyes pinned him in place. Kylo found only remorse and... forgiveness...
and _love_ there.

Nothing truly pierced through the darkness until the light began to fade from his father's eyes. His
father – who still loved him – would die by _his_ hand. His throat tightened as he pushed Han away,
off the skyway, but the look in his eyes was burned into Kylo's retinas. His father's forgiving touch
was imprinted on his cheek long after he was gone. The pain he felt from that touch was worse
than any betrayal or abandonment ever could be.

*I killed him. My own father.*

The peace was gone. He felt as if he had turned the lightsaber on himself, rending his soul into broken pieces. Consuming self-hatred, guilt, and anguish immediately split open a wound he knew would never heal. He was plagued by the thought that there was nothing he could do to bring back his father, and there was no path before him that would lead him to peace. The love in his father’s eyes had fractured his soul, allowing the light to bleed through the darkness. He knew in that moment; he would never have peace.

Rage consumed all else.

A blaster bolt pierced his side, a manipulation of the Force milliseconds before impact was the only act saving him from an otherwise lethal blow. His own uncle had done it, not that he should have been surprised. He hadn’t been the first uncle to try to kill him. He glanced up further. It was the girl who had found all his weaknesses, and next to her… the traitor. He had started it all. He was the reason the droid and the girl escaped off Jakku, the reason Han Solo was on Starkiller. If he had just *killed* the traitor on Tuanul, none of it would have ever happened.

This time, he would kill him.

Rey had always believed Kylo was coming after her, but in his mind she found the truth. If she and Finn had split up, he would have abandoned his pursuit of her – and the map – to destroy his former subordinate first. It didn’t make sense. If all that Kylo wanted was the map – or to bring her back to his master – then why did he care about Finn and the lightsaber? Why fight her, why offer to *teach* her?

What had changed from the skyway to the edge of that cliff?

The memory ended abruptly, replaced by the memory of Kylo’s mother on the Command Bridge of the *Raddus*. Rey didn’t know if she had the strength to brave any more torment. Watching Kylo kill his father would haunt her nightmares for a lifetime; she couldn’t watch him try to do it to his mother, too. The Force, however, didn’t consider what she wanted.

There was something simmering under Kylo’s calm exterior. There was a desire to prove his worthiness to Snoke that Rey didn’t understand. Kylo had killed his own father, what more did he
have to prove? Unless, as was everything else with Snoke, it wasn’t enough. Nothing he did would ever be enough for that monster; why hadn’t he seen that?

Kylo circled the Raddus with two other members of his squadron. He planned to end the Resistance once and for all; not with Hux’s superweapons, but with good old-fashioned, well-placed proton torpedoes. He had destroyed their hangar, rendering Poe and the black squadron useless. If they destroyed the bridge, it would decapitate the Resistance. It was all too easy.

Then he sensed Leia.

Surprise, fear, and panic overwhelmed him. There was no anger or hatred from his mother, even after what he had taken from her. She expressed only love and fear for him…and a final hope that he would come home. His inner conflict raged.

He had already made the fateful choice to kill his own father, but this was different. This wasn’t mercy, this wasn’t under the delusion that he would find peace. Kylo could not find the strength to push that button. He couldn’t do it, but his wingman could. He was plagued by the thought that he could have stopped the missile, if only he had been calm enough to consider it sooner.

The memory cut away, replaced by his confrontation with Luke. Rey witnessed the moment he had to face him. His soul was filled with darkness, his heart hollow in betrayal. He had lost his will to live, and he was resolute to take everyone who had hurt him down with him. If necessary, he would burn down the entire galaxy with Luke in it. His fear of the man who had tried to kill him and anger for what Luke had pushed him to become all but consumed him. He had become so obsessed with his uncle, he had projected omnipotent qualities upon the mortal man.

Luke had given him an outlet for his fury and betrayal without deepening the wound in his soul caused by the death of his father. There was a brief moment of peace, when he thought he had finally killed his former master. That peace was replaced by terror when he found him still standing. Even after he was claimed by the Force, Kylo only carried contempt for Luke. He knew Luke’s parting words would haunt him. His only regret was not having his death on his hands. And with the death of Luke, Kylo's myopic focus on purpose disappeared.

The flashback abruptly changed - the anger, pain, and fear that overwhelmed the previous memories had faded. The memories were clearer now. Emotional and conflicted yet calm. She watched flashes of every single one of the interactions between her and Kylo over the past few weeks – in reverse – through his eyes. She tried desperately to slow them down; she wanted to dissect them, to know what he was thinking, to experience it all from his side. The memories were focused, however, on his response to her words.
From his decision to end their bond, to the base, to the jungle, to her room – more connections than she had realized they’d had – it was all tainted by the same feelings he had struggled with his entire childhood. While she had left the confrontations angry or irritated, he had been left hollow, disparaged, and self-loathing. In the few she didn’t, there was something else under the surface, something warm, like hope.

In those memories, she learned less about him than she did about herself. The majority of what she had said, she had believed he deserved at the time. After reliving his memories, however, there was a shame she couldn’t explain away. With her words alone, she had hurt a man who was strong enough to ignore lethal wounds. She had hurt a man who had already been hurt by so many people. In her darkness, she had become someone she didn’t recognize, and she hated it.

It was the memory of the hut on Ahch-To that hurt the most, not because of more negative feelings, but because it was imprinted with such warmth that it made her smile. It was the greatest hope she had ever felt in him. Coupled with his feelings of betrayal, it made her wonder what she had done to fail him. Certainly, she couldn’t have joined him, but could she have prevented both of their suffering by never going to him at all?

The only positive result of her recklessness was that he had killed Snoke, but then he took his place. If she had stayed on Ahch-To, maybe their connections could have continued as they had in the hut, maybe eventually he would have come to her. It hurt to imagine the possibilities she had destroyed by finding him, but she was positive of one thing; she felt his light in that memory on Ahch-To. She hadn’t been wrong about him.

His hand stretched to meet hers, and she felt his hesitation. He was so lost that his first expectation in touching her had been pain. His entire existence had become pain at every physical touch. He hadn’t known what to do without it. The warmth and comfort he had felt overwhelmed him, mirroring her own memories by that fire. There was no manipulation, no ulterior motive – just a raw, intimate, human connection. In that moment, he had been exactly who she had believed he was.

Then she saw it – the vision – the moment she desperately wanted him to explain. She had seen an impossible future, but he had seen the past. Rey waited for the moment of her parents’ death, could feel her agony, could hear her screams as she reached for the ship…

“Get out of my head!” His voice lurched her out of the vision. She grasped to hold on, but she was ripped back to her own consciousness. Whatever his vision had been, she had sensed understanding, not fear. There was no doubt in her mind that he hadn’t killed her parents. He had lied to make her hate him, but he hadn’t counted on the Force to show her exactly who he was. She wouldn’t give up hope in him yet, even if he had given up hope in her.
You're still in there, Ben. I know it.

Her eyes snapped open. Their faces were centimeters apart, separated only by the crackling blade. His face was bathed in the bright hue of the plasma, red like the blood spilt by his hands. Her eyes prickedled from the intense heat. Sweat coated her skin as it did his, but she noticed more than just sweat: tear streaks stained his cheeks. He was shaking violently, his breath uneven heavy through trembling lips. Guilt tightened in her throat as she realized that not only had he witnessed her nearly taking his life, but he had relived every single tormenting memory with her.

I'm no better than Luke. I'm no better than any of them. After everything he has been though... I am the monster.

“Ben...”

He gripped her hand tighter, pulling the blade closer to his throat. “Do it.” There was a grim acceptance to his words, an emptiness in his energy under the burning betrayal. His pained eyes were the same ones she remembered from Kamino – broken, haunted, and lost. Those eyes she had grown to know, the eyes that had never reminded her so much of... his mother could not hide the ghosts of the past that forever plagued him.

If there was ever a moment she wanted him to be angry, it was then. Anything he said to her in that moment, she would have deserved; but for once he wasn't angry. His words were not sharp with hatred, but heavy with pain. “Do it, Jedi! What are you waiting for? Do it for your friends and Han and your parents. You’ll be doing my mother a favor, trust me.”

His words jolted her into action. She deactivated the weapon and pulled her hands away, sobbing. “No...I can’t...” she gasped between sobs. Kylo’s intense gaze finally left hers. Laying on his back, he stared at the ceiling, gasping for air to calm his nerves, his body still shaking from the adrenaline. Rey wanted to tell him that his death would break his mother’s heart, that she had trustingly listened to Snoke’s whisper, that she never wanted him to die, but words seemed hollow under the weight of what she had done. Even if she found something that would mean anything to him after what she had done, no sound could escape the growing tightness in her throat. She wanted to touch him, fix what she had broken, but he wasn’t a scavenged ship part. He would never trust her again, if he ever had in the first place. The damage had been done.

“It was always going to be you. Just finish it.” Her eyes darted up to study his face as another wave of nausea crashed through the darkness. He still stared up the ceiling, exhaustion evident in his voice. This was not an impulsive plea under emotional duress; there was a resignation in his tone that spoke of long-suffering anticipation that he would awaken to her blade at his throat.
She knew of the trauma caused by his uncle, and then she had done this. She had naïvely allowed the darkness in and proven him right. How did she not see where the path was leading her? She had been angry, but she never wanted this. She had never regretted anything more in her life, vowing to never allow that voice into her head again.

*What have I done? What have I done to him? After everything he suffered, how could I do this to him? How could I be so easily tempted by the darkness, by that creature? I could have killed a sleeping man like it was nothing!*

She felt the electricity in the Force again. His presence was drifting back to his side of the galaxy. As his chambers faded, she heard a thought bounce around her mind.

*If it makes you feel any better, I wasn’t sleeping.*

“Ben...I’m so sorry,” she whispered, but he was gone. She cursed the Force for taking him away when she finally understood what the bond had been attempting to show her all along. Rey understood exactly who her bondmate was. Kylo lived and breathed self-imposed torment. She understood why he had contemplated ending his life, why he had told her he was tired of it all. She understood now. His every breath was dedicated to sustaining the betrayal, abandonment, loneliness, and desire for control over his own destiny – not because he necessarily wanted power, darkness, or violence – but because he had given up everything he had for it. To turn would, in his mind, make his suffering in vain. He had sold his soul to the darkness. What would be worth more than that to convince him to return to the light?

What would happen when she told him that it had been Snoke who had been in her mind? The same creature that had tortured him for years had nearly convinced her to kill him. She thought back to all the untruths the darkness had convinced her of, all the pain she had caused her bondmate by listening to his former master. Even if Kylo hated her, she owed it to him to warn him.

*I have to tell him the truth.*

*You know what the truth would do to him,* the voice – Snoke – whispered in her head. *He would live in eternal fear. He would push you away. It would be simple, in his weakness, for me to convince him to give in to the darkness again. I could turn his heart for good. But if you don’t tell him the truth, child, then I will stay out of his mind. I’ll give him peace.*

Rey closed her eyes and found the light to push the darkness away. If she kept the barriers in place, if she kept the darkness at bay, then the whisper wouldn’t find its way back in. Kylo had been a
young boy when the voice appeared, but she knew better; she could control it. She decided right then that she would carry the burden for him, even if he severed the bond. It was worth it to make sure he never had to hear that monster in his mind again. It was his only chance.

Chapter End Notes

Warning! This chapter and the previous chapters are very dark chapters. Rey is reliving some of Kylo's darkest memories. If you're concerned about a trigger, it is likely in here. There is graphic violence, many characters deaths, physical torture, psychological torture, grooming of a young child, gaslighting, abuse, manipulation, you name it. If you have a specific trigger, it's better to play it safe and message me with concerns as there are many specific violent scenarios encountered here. Nothing written here is worth putting yourself through mental duress. I would be more than
happy to piece together parts of the chapters or give a detailed overview as I understand they are important chapters.
Kylo's Reaction

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Kylo sat on the edge of his bed, his head resting in his shackled hands, for the remainder of the night. He knew sleep would not come easily; he was lost to his own tormenting thoughts. He knew the nightmares would come, like every other night, but after Rey contemplated killing him, too, he knew the nightmares would be much worse.

It hadn't been in combat, or during one of their explosive confrontations. He wasn't threatening her friends’ lives, or hers. He had walked away. She had found him in the quiet of the night as he lay unconscious, just as his uncle had done. He knew why; the hatred in her eyes was evident from the moment he had taken the blame for killing her parents, but he couldn’t tell her the truth. If that was what she chose to believe, then that was better than the alternative.

After his meltdown in the receiving hall, then Rey’s subsequent decision to render him unconscious, he had been locked in his chambers with armed guards posted outside. But when he sensed the guards retreating, he realized it was more of a "sleep it off" situation rather than actual imprisonment.

When it was officially more "early," than "late," he easily discarded the shackles with the Force. He opened the last received message, as encrypted and anonymous as the others. Supply freighters secured at primary pick-up location, it read. Cargo will be secured at secondary pick up location shortly. Transport will depart on designated route in twenty-four hours.

Twenty-four hours.

Kylo deleted the message with finality. It was almost over. Despite his conflicted feelings he knew it was for the best. But the next twenty-four hours would be torture if he didn’t distract himself. Sleep was out of the question, so he decided to weapons train. An abysmal amount of his time was spent in isolation on this ship, but training was a different type of isolation. This was an isolation from his own mind.

His plan was to spend the entire day cycle and subsequent night cycle weapons training, or until he passed out from exhaustion – he had no preference. His sole focus was to distract himself from the impending departure that would signify the beginning of the end, but also to suppress the previous night's events that replayed in his mind with a nauseating relentlessness.
Kylo remembered feeling her presence next to him as he slept. When she did see him, she tried to get as far away from him as possible. His presence had repulsed her. He pretended to sleep, to avoid another confrontation. If she asked him about her parents’ death, he would be forced to tell her the truth; he couldn’t do that. He thought if he just ignored her, eventually they would fade away to their divergent lives on opposing sides of the galaxy again.

But she had approached him, and for some ill-conceived reason, he had just waited, curious – and naïvely hopeful – of what she would do. He could sense her through the Force, could see her staring down at him. Her hand had hovered over his face, presumably to touch him, but then she withdrew it as though he were some terrifying creature. He sensed that frighteningly familiar, oppressive darkness when it overwhelmed her.

Part of him had known what she came for, but he had refused to believe she would do that after what she knew. Holding his breath, he awaited her judgment. A sickening ache settled in his stomach as she called his lightsaber, an ache that had not dissipated since.

The sight of her, plasma blade held to his throat, as she contemplated severing his mortal coil was nearly identical to... that night. The only difference was, he had known Luke would do it. There was something in her eyes. Weakness. Even in her darkness, he knew she didn't have it in her. He had impulsively reacted to her weakness, possibly to teach her to a lesson – or possibly he had reached his own moment of weakness. He should have expected it, every time they had met in person, she had tried to kill him. Why should their bond be any different?

When he had grasped the weapon to wrench her closer to him, to frighten her, something... happened. He could sense her rifling through his memories like she was studying a holobook. He had built up a fortress against her, but she was able to slide in as if she had the passcode. She saw everything. She felt everything. He was powerless to stop her. It left him so...vulnerable, and Kylo hated vulnerable. But he didn't hate her. Even after she had attempted to kill him. Even though she had been the first person that he had confessed to about what had happened that fateful night at Luke's temple, and she had used it against him.

When she was on Ahch-To, he convinced himself that confiding in her was a warning of what Luke would do when he inevitably sensed her power. But there was a part of him that wanted to share everything with her, for her to see who he truly was. When he thought back to their bond connections, it was a moment he thought he had felt something change in her. She knew how he had awoken to Luke's weapon prepared to strike – a moment that had subjected him to paralyzing nightmares ever since. It had seemed that she believed him, that she cared what his uncle had done to him. But then she betrayed him in the exact same way.

Rey was the person he would do anything for, including suffering without her for the rest of his
life to keep her safe. He had tried to end the bond that tormented her, yet she desired to kill him. He should hate her, as he hated them, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Luke hadn’t given his own nephew a chance. This was different. He was her enemy; he let her believe he killed her parents.

He deserved her hatred.

But killing him would have been more merciful.
Chapter End Notes

The chapters-long memory sequence is officially over, so we have been downgraded from 'heavy angst' to just 'angst.'

Reference to threats of violence

Kylo briefly references Rey nearly killing him
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
“Let me in, Ben!” Rey screamed as she spun her staff and thrust it expertly into her imagined target, nearly twisting her ankle on a white, glowing rock under her foot. She kicked the rock to join the others shimmering in the stream that cut through the jungle floor. The red of the sediment tinted the water. It was an ever-present reminder of what she had almost done. Her body was shaking, sweat glistened on her skin, but she was relentless in her practice. Kylo had effectively shut her out. His presence was still as strong as ever in the corner of her mind that he had carved out for himself, but no amount of screaming, begging, meditation, or pushing into his energy brought him to her.
Rey had listened to Snoke and betrayed him; in a manner nearly identical to what Luke had done when Kylo first fell into Snoke's grasp. She feared what he would do this time. She couldn’t stomach the thought of losing him to the darkness forever. He had light left in him; she had seen it. What she had done to him was unforgivable; she knew that, and she wouldn’t blame him if he hated her. She deserved it. If he wanted to end their bond, she wouldn't blame him, but she wouldn’t give up on bringing him home.

Leia deserved to have her son back. She believed if she could only explain to him that it was her weakness, that she allowed the darkness tempt her – that he was right about her – then maybe she could convince him to talk to his mother. Then maybe Leia could succeed where Rey had failed. The last thing she would allow to come of her betrayal would be to leave him to his own darkness again.

“Ben, I'm sorry! Please!” she screamed into the trees. Her only answer was a low rumbling.

Another recon ship?

Breathing deeply, she attempted to calm her nerves. Her head tilted to the heavens above.

No, thunder, she realized.

The turquoise sky was growing darker, but she wanted to delay the inevitable for as long as possible. She knew she could not stall the conversation with Leia any longer, but after what she had done to Kylo, she dreaded facing his mother.

How do I explain to her that he saved my life, and then I tried to kill him?

Before she could further contemplate her fears, the skies opened above her. She reluctantly gathered her weapon and pack, preparing to end her training session early.

Then she cried out in unexpected pain.

It wasn't until the first few droplets had touched her skin that she understood her oversight. Round, red wounds were forming on her exposed shoulders as the acid rain fell around her. With a jump aided by the Force, she leaped across the river in the direction of the temple.
Her panic spiked as she sprinted through the trees, searching for protection from the immediate downpour. After being caught in enough sandstorms, she understood the dangers of a progressing storm, and knew she wouldn’t make it back to base. She pressed herself against the tall stalk of a towering purple flower – its 3-meter-long, trumpet-shaped petals providing her adequate cover. She sank to the ground and closed her eyes, waiting for the storm to pass. The thunder sounded directly above her, and she couldn’t help the childish fears, the loneliness, the helplessness that returned.

Her mind drifted back to the dust storms that she had weathered in the abandoned AT-AT, covering her ears as she had back then as the weather raged around her. The Force was overstimulating her senses as she perceived the movement and sound of every raindrop around her. Defiant tears fell down her face, and she hissed between sobs as stray droplets dripped through the shelter. But she had survived worse. It wasn’t the acid rain, or being stuck by herself in the jungle, her friend’s distrust, her impending conversation with Leia, or her bondmate’s silence, but the weight of it all that finally released the floodgates to her tears.

What was worse, the reason all of it was happening to her was no one’s fault but her own. She had failed everyone.

“I assume you are alone out here?” a deep voice asked with a solemn huff. Her eyes fluttered open to the dark shadow of her bondmate kneeling before her.

“Ben?” Her voice sounded small and weak to her own ears. She dried her tears with the back of her hand. “Be careful, the rain will –”

“Here.” His curt tone and downcast eyes made it clear that he had no interest in what she needed to tell him. His dark crimson lined cloak dangled from his fingertip. “Take it.” The refuge of his cloak was the furthest thought from her mind, however.

“I have so much to tell you. I thought you shut me out forever.” The relief of seeing him in front of her washed over the bond. Rey couldn’t help it, everything she craved to tell him and ask him was overwhelming when it was likely her last chance.

“I did.”

His words twisted the dagger of guilt in her stomach. “Then why would you help me? After everything I–”
“You may hope for my death,” he sighed, his eyes focused anywhere but on hers. “But I do not wish for yours.” Whenever his eyes snared hers in their magnetism – which he unwaveringly maintained whenever he was in her vicinity – it was overwhelming, leaving her feeling exposed and vulnerable, as if her very soul was bared to him. But this... this was far worse. The absence of his unyielding stare left a hallow and wanting ache behind her ribs.

“You shouldn't care if it hurts me, I deserve it.”

If you want to shut me out, why did you come back to torture me? I really do mean nothing to you, don’t I? This is tearing me apart and you look... fine.

“Enough,” he snapped as if he had been privy to her thoughts. Perhaps he had; she had a habit of projecting, after all. “Just take it.”

It was tearing her apart inside, and he was apathetic. Evidently, he was better off without her. Anger rose in her throat as he made it clear that she meant nothing to him. “I don't need your pity or your help.”

His face was blank and unreadable, his only tell was the annoyance in his voice – the lip-curling manner in which his response passed through his teeth: “Clearly.”

“I survived on my own my entire life! I never...”

“Needed me?” he finished. “No, but you could have used my help. Just because you can do it on your own, Rey, doesn't mean you should. If your friends were here to help you, if you would let them in enough to help you, then I wouldn't have had to subject you to my presence. Consider this a selfish request. I may block you out, but if you do not block me out, I can still feel your pain. It's... distracting.” His tone was bitter under the sneer of his words, and it was enough to break her reactive anger. As hurt as she was, she didn’t want their last moments together to be contentious.

“Ben, I...”

Kylo shook his head to silence her. “Don’t.” There was a desperation to his plea that hadn't been present before. It sounded almost pained. His indifference was a pretense, she realized, and it was crumbling. “Just...humor me?” His hand trembled as he extended the cloak for her, reaching across the galaxy, his eyes finally meeting hers in painful familiarity, imploring her to take it.
“Fine, but stay with me,” she begged, her voice cracking with emotion. “Please, just listen.”

“No,” his lip quivered as he spoke. “It's best if… I can’t. I've stayed too long already. The bond - we have to block it out.” Understanding that she would not willingly take the cloak from him, he placed it on the ground in front of her and stood.

No. I can't let you do this!

She jumped to her feet and reached for him. “I don't want to end the bond, Ben! I'm sorry! You can hate me, but please, just listen!” He huffed a stuttered breath, his body trembling behind a façade of strength and resolution. She caught the slightest glistening in his eyes before he turned from her, walking away without another word. Refusing to let him leave without a fight, she abandoned the safety of cover to run after him. “Talk to me,” she shouted, wincing through the pain, “Or I'll stand out here in the middle of the rain until you do.”

He sighed, acquiescing to her demand by pivoting to face her. His jaw tightened as she glared up at him obstinately, but he pressed his lips together to suppress whatever thought had passed through his mind. He chose to extend their suffering through silence instead. A lack of pain suddenly stole her attention, as she realized a single raindrop hadn’t fallen on her since he had turned to confront her. She cautiously tilted her head up to see the droplets – suspended in motion by the Force – hovering above their heads.

They glistened like jewels in the low light, and Rey stared in awe at the skill her bondmate possessed. She couldn’t remember if she had ever seen the Force used to create something so... beautiful. Rey was distracted enough by the sight, she barely registered when the cloak was gently removed from her grasp. It wasn't until his looming form stepped closer that her eyes flickered up to study him.

Kylo leaned down, his full lips close enough for her to feel the huff of his warm, anxious breath on the side of her face. She swallowed thickly as he wrapped the cloak around her shoulders, securing it with practiced hands. His eyes were focused while he quietly worked, and she studied the softening sorrow in them. He removed the broach displaying the First Order insignia, leaving a plain silver clasp underneath. Part of her hoped he would discard it on the jungle floor, a symbol of his growing disillusionment with the side he had chosen, but he clenched it tightly in his fist instead. She refused to speak, fearful to break the fragile armistice between them.

Countless lives had been taken in the violence delivered by his hands, but it was nearly impossible to imagine as he carefully lifted the hood over her head. His hands were torturously gentle, his fingertips tickled her cheek when he brushed a lock of hair from her face. The gesture was more
tender than anything she had ever experienced. The warmth that fluttered in her chest drove away any darkness that lingered along the border of her consciousness. She hadn't realized how profoundly the darkness had clouded her thoughts until it was gone. Remorse and guilt twisted through her stomach as she felt with clarity what their bond meant to her.

“Ben, you don’t have to do this.” Her eyes searched his frantically for a reflection of the emotions pooling in hers, but the only emotions she could recognize behind his red-rimmed eyes were fear and pain.

“I do,” he choked, fists clenched as he forced himself to release the hood he was still gripping. His body leaned toward her as if he were desperate for her touch, betraying the harrowed words his lips had spoken. He might leave her, but she couldn’t let him go without knowing she would fight for him.

“I'm sorry, Ben. What I did to you... If you hate me, I understand. If you want to break our bond, I deserve it. If you can't forgive me, I'll have to live with that. But I want you to know, if you walk away, I'll still fight to bring you home to your mother. And if you feel alone, I'll be here waiting for you. I know who you are, and nothing will ever make me forget that, not even the darkness.”

She sobbed as he shook his head silently, blinking back tears in his own eyes. He pressed his lips together and swallowed his emotions. She could sense an inner conflict rage violently inside him. Squeezing his eyes shut, he huffed a trembling breath, and she allowed herself to hope that he would stay. Her hope dwindled, however, as she felt darkness seep through the bond. When he opened his eyes, there was a steely resolve that broke her heart.

“Goodbye, Rey,” he said hoarsely. “Here are some bacta patches for those... 'training wounds.'” Kylo discarded the bandages at her feet, then turned away without hesitation, leaving her behind. She realized immediately he was referencing the lie she had told him about the wounds on her hands when she first arrived on Barkhesh, a lie he had likely never believed, but let her tell anyway because that was who he was. He would accept the lies and cutting words, and internalize it all, suffering in silence until the relationship was broken beyond repair. It was what he had done his entire life. He wore a practiced mask as the cruelty of others tore him to pieces inside.

He had become loyal, protective, and nurturing to her in his struggle with darkness, but she had been too blind with disappointment and anger to see it. Everyone he had ever loved had let him down. Rey should have been different; she knew he had hoped she would be, but she hadn't feared the darkness. She never had reason to fear it and had nearly fallen because of her ignorance. They had warned her, but she didn't listen – she didn't want to listen. It had cost her the only person who understood her. Her only consolation was that he had learned to walk away. His loyalty had caused him a lifetime of suffering, and for once he had chosen to let go. She would have been proud of him if it didn't mean losing him.
He walked with determination, not taking a single glance back to where he had left her in the rain. He did not exude the confidence he had when he was cruel to her on the bridge or the conflicted anger when he had told her he wanted the bond to end—no, this time his shoulders were slumped, his head sagging as he disappeared from sight. This time, she knew he meant it. The Force snapped as he was jolted back to his side of the galaxy. The closed-off bond was strong in her mind, but she wondered how long before it began to weaken and die.

*Will he find a way to sever it completely? Or will it slowly disappear until I can't feel it anymore?*

Rey wrapped the cloak around herself and sobbed into the textured cloth as she found her way back to the temple. It smelled distinctly like him—a mixture of Trillium soap, leather, and ozone, with the hint of durasteel, recycled air, sweat and masculine pheromones that were uniquely Kylo. It was her favorite smell, she decided, even more than food, flowers, or rain. She hiccuped a sob as grief grasped her in its steely claws.

That cloak was all she had left. She would never be able to smell him again. How long before his smell was gone from his cloak? How long until she forgot what he smelled like completely? Or what his energy in the Force felt like? Or the softness of his hand? Or the fire in his eyes? Or the tender murmur of her name on his lips? Would his face haunt her dreams? She hoped so. She never wanted to forget him.

*How long until he forgets me?*

Rey followed her feet back to the Resistance, a hooded wraith in the rain. As she made her way up the steps of the temple, back to the reality of war, she considered turning around, finding a suitable shelter and surviving in solitude. She had done it before, she could do it again. Her certainty of belonging with the Resistance had waned. They needed her to be something she couldn’t.

Rey wouldn't kill the Supreme Leader, and she couldn't bear the thought of standing by and allowing them to do it—listening to their cheers as she grieved the loss of his energy in the Force. Kylo was her enemy, but she couldn't be present when Kylo Ren took Ben Solo down with him.

If there was a spare ship that could blast her away from that planet, away from all of it, she would have left in a heartbeat. Maybe she would find a desolate outer rim planet like Ahch-To, or maybe she would return to Jakku. Maybe she would float in space until the bounty hunters found her, delivered her to the First Order, and forced Kylo to talk to her or kill her.
As she descended the steps into the darkness of the temple, she almost retraced her steps back outside the temple and into the rainforest, but a familiar voice echoing from their makeshift command room caught her attention. The Force called to her, drawing her closer as if she were in a trance. She was not in an emotional state to socialize, but her feet had a mind of their own as they carried her toward the room. As she entered the vast hall, her friends’ eyes met hers. Rose and Finn stared at her tear-streaked cheeks in concern.

“I need to speak with Maz,” she announced firmly. “Alone.”

There was a commanding coldness to her voice that she barely recognized, a darkness that was not the influence of Snoke. She knew they sensed it. Most left the room silently, averting their eyes from Rey. Poe hesitated in front of her.

“That’s new. Where did you get it?” he asked, pointing to the cloak. The levity in his tone belied the gravity of his question. Had it been any other day, she would have trembled in fear. She felt nothing as she glared at him fiercely.

_Fight me, Poe, I dare you._

Her hand curled around her staff as she prepared for another confrontation with him, but Maz spoke up from the holo behind him.

“Give us ladies the room, kiddo,” she told him. He turned, and they stared at each other silently for a moment, a heaviness in the air, before she nodded in affirmation of her request. He left promptly without another word, but not without a glance back at the cloak she wore.

“Do you have news?” Rey asked, fearful that it had something to do with Kylo.

“I will try to summarize it as best I can for you, dear,” Maz supplied, eying the trembling woman carefully. “During the Galactic Civil War, the war between the Galactic Empire and the Alliance to Restore the Republic, there was a Rebel base on Dantooine. Due to a hasty evacuation – in favor of a new rebel base on the moon Yavin IV – spare starfighters, supplies, equipment, and munitions had been left behind. Leia, still a princess then, was captured by the Empire and provided them with the location of Dantooine as the Rebel base, knowing that it had been abandoned.”

“She believed that the base had been destroyed by the Empire in that war over thirty years ago. But I was recently provided coordinates for the base, and we discovered that it is still as the Rebellion
had left it. The Empire must have searched it, but never had the chance to destroy it. As your current base has likely been compromised, it has been decided that Dantooine will be your next destination. I have traded in a few favors, and the entirety of the Resistance will be transported safely aboard Corellian transport freighters that routinely carry supplies for the First Order. I'll help my boyfriend the Wookie find a safe route aboard the *Falcon* and meet you there.”

“That was lucky – the coordinates,” Rey said quietly, more relieved that the news did not involve her bondmate than anything else. She knew her current emotional stability was held together by a single thread; the volatile emotions churning inside her threatened to spill out into the Force. Had she heard news that Kylo had done something hopelessly evil or that the Resistance had plans to attack his ship, she would have likely lost control of her emotions and leveled the room in her grief. She was thankful, as she stood trembling, that her emotions tore apart her heart instead.

“It was more than luck.” Maz's words were cryptic, but Rey was too exhausted to care. Maybe Rey should have been elated that the Resistance would find a new base, with supplies, and become a formidable opponent to the growing empire of the First Order, but she wasn't. She wanted the First Order to fall, she wanted her friends to survive, but she wanted Ben Solo to come home too.

Rey was beginning to realize the truth – hoping for a fantastical ending to the war was naïve. The Force required balance; too much damage had been done. For the galaxy to find peace, and the family she had found to be saved, there had to be destruction and loss. The First Order would fall, and if it did, Kylo Ren would die. Kylo wasn’t ready to turn. How could she save Ben Solo if he shut her out?

Maz was on a freighter, a large one based on her limited view of the counter that stretch across the entire holo. Rey could see others moving in and out of the holo, and she assumed that it was the other smugglers who had been displaced when the palace fell. Wherever Maz was, she was removing tumblers and what Rey assumed was alcohol from a shelf behind her.

“Maz?” she asked, her eyes downcast as she considered giving life to words she knew she shouldn’t.

The venerable pirate queen studied her carefully. Rey could feel the heat of her gaze. “Yes, child.”

“I don't know if I belong here – the Resistance.” Rey hiccuped as the floodgate of her tears reopened. The older woman patiently waited until Rey reluctantly met her gaze.

Maz's hands had abandoned the alcohol bottles to lean her hands on the counter and focus her attention on Rey. Her smile was warm and open, not as judgmental as she had anticipated. Rey
resented it; she deserved her judgment. After a moment of studying her, Maz directed her focus on gathering more bottles from the shelf. “Where do you belong?” she asked over her shoulder. “Back on Jakku?”

Rey fumbled with the edge of her cloak. “No.”

“Ah, you know now that your belonging is not in the past,” Maz gestured toward Rey with one of the bottles. “But you fear it is not with the Resistance. The question is – have you found the belonging you seek, Rey?”

Rey shook her head in response.

“No?”

“No.”

_I thought I would find home here. I thought the Resistance would be my family. But they all fear me. Even Luke. He refused to teach me and show me my place in this. I am still as lost as I ever was. “You were wrong.”_

Maz hummed. “How so?”

“You told me I would find belonging with Luke,” Rey said through tears. “But he refused to teach me! And now he’s gone, just like everyone else,”

The older woman set aside the bottles she was holding to adjust her goggles as she studied Rey’s eyes. “Young Rey, search your feelings. You know the truth – it is right in front of your nose. If I remember correctly, I told you ‘the belonging you seek is not behind you, it is ahead.’ And I believe my words were ‘those you are waiting for on Jakku are never coming back, but there is someone who still could, with your help.’”

Rey remembered it well. It was a simpler time then. She had escaped Jakku and had feared that her parents would be searching for her in her absence. Finn had left her like everyone else. The war did not matter to her. There were no people in her life to let down. She had no idea Kylo existed. There had been no pressure to be someone she wasn’t, and the Jedi were merely a legend.
“Right... Luke, but he can't come back. And I didn't find my belonging with him.” Rey attempted to hide the vexation in her voice, but she didn't know why she bothered. Maz was sure to sense it anyway.

Maz lifted the different colored bottles and began pouring them skillfully into a tumbler. When she glanced up from the tumbler, there was a secret twinkle in her eye. “No, dear child. You assumed Luke.”

*You said there was someone who could still come back. The people I am missing - my parents, Han, Luke, they are all dead. There is no one left who could come back.*

Only there was one person, her mind supplied, that she wanted desperately to come back.

*Ben.*

“There, yes, right there,” Maz startled her from her thoughts as she slapped her hand on the counter next to the tumbler she was preparing. “I saw truth break through the denial clouding your eyes. Rey, whatever you just saw in your mind? That is your answer.”

Rey’s response was immediate, almost mechanical: “No.”

*I thought after the vision he could be, that he would turn, but I was wrong.*

Maz adjusted her goggles, her knowing eyes piercing deeper into her soul. “Hmm...” Maz moved back to preparing the drink, focusing her attention on pouring a bright purple liquid over the previous concoction. When she had finished, she stirred it idly as she spoke. “Is this person the cause of those tears?”

Rey willed away more tears. She reminded herself who she was talking to and whom they were talking about. “Yes, and he's never coming back.”

“He?” Maz said with a smile as she dropped a tablet into the tumbler that immediately began fizzling. “Hmm... interesting. Why do you believe that?” The casualness with which she spoke was disarming, Rey felt like she could tell her anything.
Where do I begin? I have been cruel and selfish and clouded by darkness. I have somehow been hearing the whispers of a creature I thought was dead and listened to his lies until I almost killed someone who has become a part of me, while he slept. I don't want to kill Ben, I want to save him. But he thinks I was using him and wants to sever the bond. And now he’s further from turning than ever, and it’s all my fault.

“I did something I can never take back,” she whispered, hoping that projected thoughts were courtesy of the bond and Maz was incapable of hearing her treacherous thoughts.

“Well, that is an interesting sentiment; nothing you do can ever be taken back, Rey, only atoned for. It is the past, we can't change it.” Maz finished sprinkling glittery flakes on the fizzy purple drink and slid it down the counter. Without a second’s pause, Maz began on the next drink, lifting a fluorescent green bottle from the shelf and uncorking it with her teeth.

“What I did was terrible,” Rey amended. “He hates me.”

If Maz was incapable of reading her mind through the Force, she seemed to do just fine through studying her eyes. The conspiratorial smile that crossed Maz's face was unnerving. “Is he the same man who gave you that distinctive and unique cape?” Rey's heart stuttered as time slowed. She couldn’t know, could she?

Maz wasn’t studying her, searching for the truth, but Rey’s next words were cautious anyway. “If he was?”

The older woman began pouring the liquid delicately into the tumbler as it bubbled and smoked. She spoke around the cap in her mouth as if they were discussing nothing of consequence. “Then I would tell you that lost, foolish boy does not hate you, Rey.”

Maz couldn’t know. The cloak wasn't that unique, especially after he removed the broach. Even if it was, Maz would have had to cross paths with Kylo, and talk with him, about Rey. She knew Kylo would never do that. But that knowledge did nothing to dull the spark of hope in her broken heart.

Rey lowered her voice to nearly a whisper, so her tone wouldn't betray them both. “How would you know?”
“As I said, that is a very unique cape.” Maz's smile grew wider, her eyes sparkling in a shared secret that Rey hoped she remained ignorant of. Maz finished mixing the drink and passed that one down the counter as well. This time, however, she didn’t immediately embark on creating the next drink. Her stare was focused on Rey. “I happened to have a conversation with a certain lost boy wearing that exact cape recently – retrieving my crew from a First Order supply freighter, just outside Taris. I saw it in his eyes, kiddo; he doesn't hate you. Not at all.”

Rey's memory flashed to Kamino when Kylo's general had informed him of a supply freighter outside Taris that had been lost. Then it skipped forward to the night of the meaningless kiss with Poe, when Kylo said he was handling a “pirate problem.” Maz was considered a pirate queen.

_Oh Force, she knows._

Rey moved closer to the holo, lowering her voice to a whisper. “Maz, it's not what you think...”

“Oh, but that's not the truth, is it Rey?” She replied, not unkindly. “It is exactly what I think. That is why your eyes are filled with fear.” The entire scenario seemed completely impossible. He had been in his fighter. Why would he talk to her? Why would she talk to him?

Though, Rey conceded it _was_ possible. Maz did know Han Solo. Had she known his son as well? Rey shuddered. What happened after his fighter exploded? If he _did_ talk to her, what did he tell her? Why didn’t he tell Rey? Who else knew? The possibilities were terrifying as Rey imagined what Leia or Poe would do when she relayed her suspicions.

“Please, don't tell anyone!”

Maz chuckled as she shifted on the stool she was standing on to reach a bottle on the far side of the shelf. When she turned back, her eyes seemed... compassionate. “Oh, child, though it is an interesting one, it is not my story to tell. In all my years I haven’t seen a story quite like it, and I am most curious to see how it plays out.” It was not the response Rey had expected when she finally revealed that she had a complicated, and treasonous, connection with the Supreme Leader.

The words slipped out before Rey had time to consider the consequences. “What did he say about me?”

“Hmm?” Maz's expression was playful and feigned innocence. She poured a clear liquid into a tumbler that looked deceptively innocuous compared to the other liquids she had poured.
“In your conversation,” Rey said, her words rushed and impatient. “What makes you believe he doesn't hate me?”

The teasing smile that twitched on Maz’s face further frustrated Rey. The woman wouldn’t look at her now that Rey wanted answers, too busy pouring another clear liquid into the tumbler. “Who?”

“You know who!” Rey clenched her fists in irritation, prepared to scream at the woman or storm from the room. She was in no mood for games.

“I do,” Maz said in amusement. “Do you?”

“Ben!”

Rey gasped, covering her mouth to prevent more treasonous admissions to the woman who clearly sympathized with the Resistance.

Maz, however, wasn’t nearly concerned as she was. With a snap of her fingers, the surface of the clear liquid ignited in a blue flame. “The truth feels freeing, doesn't it?” Maz slid the tumbler down to the counter and returned her gaze to Rey, who had started to sense that their exchange had become a lesson to the centuries-old humanoid. A purposeful, vexatious lesson that she didn’t understand.

Rey shook her head, wrapping herself tighter in the cloak. “The truth is terrifying, actually.”

“The truth usually is, child. It is a fear you must face, however. The truth reveals who we are. And,” Maz said, using another bottle she pulled from the shelf to gesture to the young woman, “the truth you spoke is quite revealing.”

“How so?”

Maz took Rey's irritated tone in stride, chuckling to herself before her expression became knowing again. “You chose not to refer to him as Kylo Ren.”
After feeling like she was playing a game in which she didn’t know the rules, she was thankful for something that finally had a simple answer. “Because that’s not his name.”

Maz took her time pouring the viscous, sapphire liquid into the tumbler. The moment stretched, and Rey wondered if she would answer. When she had nearly finished pouring, she said casually, “It is to those who do not care for him.”

Rey sighed. She was weary of the games and the attempts at great cosmic lessons; all she wanted were answers that Maz was clearly in no hurry to give. “What does it matter what I call him?”

“It intrigues me,” the older female chuckled. The holoprojector followed her as she hopped over the counter onto a tall stool. When she had settled into her seat – which took a suspiciously long time – she took a long sip from her tumbler. When she was finished, her gaze finally returned to Rey. “You never knew him as ‘Ben,’ the ones around you do not refer to him as ‘Ben,’ he chooses not to call himself ‘Ben,’ you are confident that he is never coming back… and yet, you refuse to call him Kylo Ren. Why?”

_I called him Kylo Ren when I believed there was no light left in him. The moment I call him Kylo Ren again, is the moment I give up on him. And the moment I give up on him is the moment I give up on hope. I know who he truly is. I betrayed him and he brought me his cloak. Ben Solo is not dead._

“Because I know him.”

“How?” Maz continued to pry, swirling the sparkling blue liquid of her drink until it looked like she contained the galaxy in her glass. “How did you get to know a man who is stationed halfway across the galaxy in a way that no one else has? How do I sense your energy within him and his energy within you as if...”

“We have a Force bond, okay?” she snapped in frustration. “That is how he gave me this cloak today. When we are connected, I see him as if he is physically here. But I betrayed him when I... listened to the darkness. I nearly murdered him, Maz, just before the Force showed me a vision of his memories. I know exactly who he is now. And I know he is not a monster. But Ben Solo is still trapped inside Kylo Ren. He is still the Supreme Leader, and he wants to destroy our bond. That is why I can't tell the Resistance.”

Maz was quiet as Rey recovered from her outburst, the words strengthening in meaning the longer the silence grew. She hadn’t meant to say it, but Maz continued to push her. Part of Rey wished she could take them back if only to spare herself further judgment. “Why must you keep this burden
from people who care for you?” Maz was kind in her questioning, but Rey knew that in this excavation of secrets, she would be forced to confront truths that she was not prepared to face.

“Because he is my enemy!”

“Is he?” Maz asked, eying her over the glass as she took another long sip. “He doesn't sound like an enemy to me. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

“He is their enemy. He is supposed to be my enemy. As the last Jedi, I am supposed to fight him,” her voice broke, “... to kill him.” The tears began spilling down her cheeks again, the thought of his life ending by her hands unbearable. She felt ridiculous for crying in front of Maz about someone the woman likely despised.

Maz's voice wasn’t reproachful for the emotional display, but she continued to press Rey, forcing her to confront her beliefs, as Kylo had done on Ahch-To. “According to whom?”

_Everyone._

Rey hiccuped a sob. “Well, as far as the Resistance is concerned –”

“Now is not the time to let others forge your path for you,” Maz said, her voice growing sterner. Her hand slammed the tumbler onto the counter surface more forcefully than necessary in her sudden agitation. She leaned forward to capture Rey’s undivided attention, tapping her finger on the counter to emphasize her words. “The Force has intervened with your destinies, and that is not something to be taken lightly. The Force has a significant destiny for you. As for the Resistance, they are mere mortals, Rey, just like the rest of us. We cannot see the future. In all my years, I could have never foreseen this bond between you. Nor can I fully appreciate its consequences. We can only make decisions based upon what we know to be true. And individual truth is subjective. We have not seen what the Force has shown you. We do not know him like you say you do. The important question is not what others expect of you, but what do _you_ believe? Where does the Force guide you?”

“I thought the Force showed my belonging with him, in a vision,” Rey whispered. The comfort of finally having somewhere safe to express her thoughts lessened the ache in her chest. “But it was a lie. The Force was wrong.”

“The Force is never wrong, kiddo.”
Maz was so certain, and Rey wondered how she could have such blind faith. Undoubtedly, Maz must have suffered in her centuries of life experience. If Rey had learned one thing in her short life, it was that she could trust no one, especially not some omnipotent power that would supposedly make everything okay. She had trusted the Force too many times to count since she left Jakku. When had it ever been okay?

“Now, I am no Jedi,” the older woman continued as she finished her drink and shoved the tumbler aside. “I have lived centuries and still know very little about the Force. Some say you have infinite destinies woven in the Force. The Force can guide you, provide you with a vision of what could be, but your own actions could alter your path from that destiny. You could have made the simple decision to walk past this room – never having this conversation – and your entire destiny could have been altered. Every single decision, no matter how insignificant, could change the path of your destiny. I have heard it explained as placing a large boulder to block a small stream of water. Depending upon where the boulder is placed, it changes the flow of the stream. Once the boulder is placed, the flow of the water is forever altered. Each boulder is every choice you make in your life. It means every choice you make is life-altering. But that is only one theory.

“There are others who believe there are infinite universes, each fulfilling a separate destiny. A vision in the Force may show you a destiny of yours in another universe. It was a destiny never meant for this version of you. There could be a universe where you had a family who never abandoned you, or one where young Solo never turned to the dark side. In one universe he could kill you. In another universe, you could kill him. In yet another, you could fall into one another’s arms as lovers. Those destinies would be very different from the destinies in this universe.

“Or... maybe not. Maybe the same destiny is fated to you for the eternity of lives you live and universes you experience. Maybe you and young Solo always have and always will have destinies that are intertwined. And whatever fate is to befall you both, no matter what choices either of you have made, is the only destiny you will ever be fated.

“As for me, I believe a little bit of it all. I believe there is only one destiny in the Force meant for each of us, but that does not necessarily mean that it will come to pass. I believe we have the choice to forsake our true destinies, but I believe that will only bring our soul suffering if we make that choice. I believe we live many lives, maybe for eternity, or maybe until we follow the path of our true destiny. I do not believe we are condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past, or that our choices are meaningless to our future. Your fate is what you make of it, child. Choose wisely. And I believe Force visions can be very...complex. It is difficult to interpret a vision of the future with the eyes of the present. So a vision is never wrong, only your interpretation of it.’’

“How do I know what choice to make?” Rey asked the wise older woman. “How do I know when the Force is guiding me down the right path? How do I know when to listen? How do I know when to fight, and when to let go?”
“The Force will always guide you down the right path, Rey. *Listen.* Not with your ears. Listen to the *truth* in here,” Maz said, placing her hand over her chest. “You will always know if you listen hard enough. Close your eyes. Feel the warmth inside you, let the Force flow through you. You will find the right path when you are honest with yourself about where the Force is guiding you. You just have to have patience and trust in it.” Rey wanted to scream. Maz didn’t understand the darkness. She didn’t know the conflict of the Force trying to guide her down two opposing paths. How could she know which side to trust? Sometimes the darkness didn’t present itself as darkness. If she had heeded this advice, with the guidance of the Force she would have *killed* her bondmate while he slept. Even if she allowed only the light to guide her, what if it led her away from the desires of the Resistance?

“How? How do I trust in a truth that everyone else tells me is wrong?”

Maz offered her a sympathetic half-smile. “They do not have the Force to guide them, Rey. They do not know the truth that is inside you.”

*If only it were that simple.*

Rey leaned back against the wall, more discouraged than she had been before the conversation. When had this *gift* begun to feel like such a curse? This was her destiny, wasn’t it? Too many sacrifices had been made for her to become the “last hope” of the Resistance, too many people were counting on her. She didn’t want to disappoint them. Why couldn’t she be what they wanted her to be? Why couldn’t the Force guide her down the path they needed her to follow?

When Rey glanced up, she met Maz’s perceptive stare. She knew she might as well have thought it all aloud. “Rey, when you go outside and look up into the sky, you cannot see the stars beyond the brightness of this one, but you *know* they’re there. You know that truth and you trust in it, even if you can’t see it yourself. If everyone around you told you there was nothing beyond this star, that the truth you believed in was wrong, would it change what you know to be true?”

“I guess not...”

“Trust in the Force,” Maz repeated. “Everything else will work itself out in the end. What does your *heart* tell you, Rey?”

Her only thoughts lingered on the strong barrier in the bond, the ache in her chest that reminded her that she had lost Kylo. The darkness found her in her despair; soothing as it seeped into the
crevices of her shattered heart.

*The truth is Ben was right.*

“It tells me that none of this matters. He's right, it's too late to save him.” Even in the darkness, she could hear the screams of something inside her telling her she was wrong; it was never too late.

Maz’s eyes were still kind, but they had narrowed slightly. “Is that why you went to the Supremacy for him and killed Snoke? Because of this belief that it’s too late?”

“I went there, but I didn't... it was Ben…” she said, lowering her voice to disguise the sorrow underneath. “Snoke said he created the bond and used Ben’s weakness to draw me into a trap. It worked; he took the map to Luke from my thoughts. Then he ordered Ben to kill me, but Ben killed him instead.”

Maz stared off into the distance, smiling and chuckling to herself as she shook her head. She murmured something too low for Rey’s ears, but she caught the tail end, “that son of yours.” When her attention returned to Rey, Maz’s smile transformed into something furtive. She rested her head on one hand, adjusting her goggles with the others. “He killed his master for you. That is quite something, young Rey."

“Does it matter?” Rey bit back the anger that was clearly misplaced. “He didn’t turn, and I thought I hated him for it. Now that I know I don’t, but he wants nothing to do with me anymore."

“Your boyfriend...” the older woman's eyes brightened with the endearment “...asked me the same question – does it matter? If you have to ask, you already know the answer.”

Rey choked on air as her chest seized, coughing forcefully she gasped, “My boyfriend?”

“...does not hate you,” Maz supplied without addressing her true question. “He has his father's heart. In fact, that boy loves too deeply. He cannot let go of that love when people inevitably disappoint him. And I know they have. It is not hate you see, but fear and anger manifested from his profound love. He feels every emotion quite passionately, as I am sure you have learned through your bond with him. You said yourself that you disappointed him, and Ben Solo does not handle that well. He has not learned how to trust or forgive; it will be a struggle for him to learn. He will need help. But there is quite a difference between pushing someone away and hating someone, Rey.”
Rey had seen the wrath of Kylo on Starkiller, the *Supremacy* and Crait. She was intimately aware of his hatred. “Then why did he try to kill me on Crait? He hated me after I wouldn’t join him and left him on *Supremacy.*”

“That is a question for young Solo.” Maz was the perfect air of calm in the face of her wrath, but it irritated Rey further. Maz should care, Maz should be upset, because Kylo’s life hung in the balance. Saving him was not only important to the war, but important to her. How could the older woman be calm when Rey felt like she was falling apart? As Maz studied her, she seemed to take pity on her struggle. “I suspect that it meant more to him than he let on.”

“He wanted power,” Rey spit out in anger, “and needed me to help him kill the guards.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

“And he hated his master.” That part didn’t bother her; she hated Snoke, she hated what he had done to her – had done to *him.* Even if the throne room had irrevocably altered their bond, she was thankful that creature was no longer in his head.

“Perhaps,” Maz said as she carefully peeled her goggles from her eyes. It was relieving, if only for a moment, to not be pinned under her all-knowing stare. “But that doesn’t explain why he reacted – very poorly – when you left.”

“He wanted me to rule with him.”

Maz grinned. She used a cloth from under the counter to meticulously clean the goggles. “So a man fixated on power wanted to share it with you. Interesting.”

Rey was certain Maz couldn’t see it, but she leveled a frustrated glare at her anyway. Whose side was she on? “He just wanted me as an ally.”

“There is no other reason a young man would ask a young woman to rule with him? Hmm?” Though Rey couldn’t see the woman’s eyes as Maz focused on cleaning her goggles, she was certain if she could, she would find mirth there. Rey was not amused. Her mind unhappily reminded her of the conflicting feelings he felt toward her in turbolift, but what Maz suggested was impossible. She was nothing. No one would ever care for her that way.
“No,” she answered.

“No?”

“Why are you so convinced that it was anything more?” Rey could feel the heat prickling underneath her skin. She was tired of Maz’s games and ridiculous questions. Kylo hated her, she was certain of that fact.

“He could have used you to help kill the guards after he killed his master, and asked you to join him in the sole pursuit of power, or…” Maz paused long enough to lift the goggles that took entirely too long to clean and placed them back over her eyes. She adjusted them as she carefully studied Rey. “Or Snoke saw something in him you didn’t. I have to ask myself what ‘weakness’ Snoke exploited through the bond to draw you there? Perhaps it was just the light you saw in him. But if that was all it was, why did he ask young Solo to kill you? That beast knew that he was forcing him to choose, I have no doubt about that. And he chose to kill someone he was loyal to – whether we believe Snoke deserved that loyalty – because he had a stronger loyalty to you. Was that loyalty why he asked you to rule with him? I suppose only your ‘Ben’ knows that answer.”

Rey’s anger, the emotion feeding her darkness, would not be tempered. Instead, she found herself screaming. “If he ‘cared’ for me, he wouldn’t have called me nothing!”

“He told you that you were nothing to him?”

“He said my parents were nobody,” she said bitterly. “I had no place in the story. I came from nothing and I am nothing, but not to him.”

“Oh, that foolish, foolish boy. Solo men and those mouths of theirs, they speak before they think. That boy needs a good smack upside the head for saying that to you. I had to give his father a few of those in my time,” she chuckled to herself. Her eyes brightened at the mention of Han. “What he said to you was cruel and misplaced. Your anger with him is understandable and necessary, but am I wrong in assuming you have forgiven him for it? You only use it as a reason to deny the truth. You know him better than anyone. What you need to ask yourself is – if he truly believed you were nothing, would the man you know save you, share the throne with you, and lose his temper when you left? Does that sound like Ben Solo?”

Everything inside her implored her to listen, but it only served to further terrify her. She knew she
had been wrong about him, but she refused to admit she was *that* wrong. “It doesn’t matter!”

“Oh Rey,” Maz’s lips pulled into her infuriatingly perceptive smile. “You and young Solo are more alike than you want to admit. An unwillingness to let go of the past, a loneliness and desire for belonging, a constant fight against the acceptance of who you are, *and* a denial of the truth that is right in front of you. Of all the words of enlightenment or wisdom that I possess, none can remove the blanket of denial – the false truth – that you are desperately holding before your own eyes. Correcting your assumptions about him is your first step correcting your cynical view of the future of your bond.”

Rey turned away. She couldn’t bear to have hope and lose it again. When Rey didn’t respond, Maz continued. “Dear child, you have spent your entire life fighting the truth. Listen to your heart. Let the Force guide you to your destiny. Trust in what will be, not what is. There is not one place in the entire galaxy you can stand and see the entirety of it. There is a bigger picture to this life. We cannot see our path interwoven in the Force, only trust in it. It is only a matter of admitting it to yourself.”

“It’s not that easy!”

Rey sucked in a shuddered breath before she turned back to Maz and continued, “If I believe Ben… cares and will somehow forgive me and come back to the light, how do I make him believe that? How do I make *them* believe that? What if I'm wrong, or they don't believe me? I can't lose him or them.”

More than anything, she wished Maz would assure her in her near clairvoyant assurances that she wouldn't have to forsake one half of her heart for the other. The very thought of losing him felt as if Snoke had invaded her body again, this time tearing the breath from her lungs rather than the thoughts from her mind. She longed to save him with a deeper ache than she had ever craved food in the most hopeless moments of starvation. It was physically painful in a way she had never felt emotional wounds before, even those left behind by her parents. She needed Maz to tell her that he wouldn't leave her; the ancient humanoid was only ever honest.

“I can't promise that your Ben or your friends won't become casualties of this terrible war,” Maz admitted, and though the reasonable part of Rey knew that, her words still stung. “The bond has put you in an unfortunate, but significant, position between that boy and the Resistance. Your lies have put you in the far more precarious position you now face. If I may give you some centuries-old wisdom… You have got yourself so tangled in the lies and secrets that even you do not know the truth anymore. And the problem with a secret is, eventually, the truth will be exposed, by you or others. Your choice is how that truth is revealed. This is quite a consequential secret you are keeping, my dear. There will be more trust if you are the one to expose your secret. And perhaps, you may be surprised that the others know more than they have let on.”
Rey wanted to scream to relieve the conflict raging inside her, but she found the strength to swallow her emotions and rasp, “Such as?”

“What happened to Snoke…your presence at his death. The minor detail of who actually killed him may be inaccurate.” Maz chuckled, but Rey felt anything but humor from the revelation. What she was suggesting could change reality as she knew it.

One of the smugglers slid a holopad in front of Maz. Her attention was drawn to the screen, and Rey could feel the unease growing with each passing second. It was impossible that they knew about the Supremacy, wasn’t it? Unless Finn told them. Maz turned to the smuggler. “You mapped this route to his exact specifications?” The smuggler nodded in affirmation and Maz turned back to the holopad.

Rey couldn’t stand waiting any longer. She attempted in vain to temper the fear quivering in her voice. “Why would they think I killed Snoke?”

“It is listed as one of the crimes you allegedly committed on the bounty.” Maz gestured vaguely with one hand as she continued to study the holopad.

Though Maz was not concerned, Rey was gripped with terror. She had lied, and they would know. What would they do when she was discovered? How could she explain what happened without exposing her connection to Kylo? “Did you tell the others?”

“Poe Dameron knows.” It finally clicked, why Poe had been so distrustful of her. He had known the whole time, and if the ever-loyal colonel knew...

“Then Leia knows.”

“More than you think, I am sure,” Maz chuckled. “She is Force-sensitive, smart as a whip, and he is her son, after all.”

Her emotions began to unravel into the Force as she considered the consequences. Maz must have sensed the change in her, because she pushed the holopad aside and directed her attention toward Rey. “This is nothing new,” she assured her, “she’s known since you landed on Barkhesh.”
It wasn’t that simple. Rey had lied, and Leia knew it. The weight of the secret she carried was too great. As the tears fell, Rey understood now when he told her he was tired of everything. Rey was tired of pretending she was someone else, she was tired of lying to the people she cared about, she was tired of fighting with her bondmate, she was tired of the conflict and the heartbreak and the war. Most of all, she was tired of disappointing good people. Leia didn’t deserve it. “She lied for me,” Rey said through tears, “I know she suspects something. But I can't break her heart. Because of what I did, her son is never coming back.”

*It already tears me apart that he shut me out, I can't see the disappointment in her eyes. What if she shuts me out? I can't lose her too.*

“Rey.” Maz waited patiently for Rey to meet her eyes. “Tell her the truth. She has suffered a lifetime of heartache, kiddo. She already lost her son a long time ago. In the eyes of everyone she cares about, her child is a monster. Maybe the truth about her son will mean more to her than the fight you had with him.”

Rey smiled through her tears. “Okay, okay. I will.”

“And Rey?” Her expression transformed into a knowing, yet almost protective, expression. “You don’t need me or the Resistance or Ben Solo to be happy. If you feel that you are compromising who you are with them, then don’t be afraid to walk away. You don’t need anyone to define you. You know who you are, in here,” she patted her chest over her heart.

“But if you ever happen to fall in love with the right person down the road, I want you to know something.” Rey opened her mouth to argue, but Maz silenced her with a warning glare. “Love is not easy. No one is perfect, some more... imperfect... than others. Love is the acceptance of those imperfections, but not if it conflicts with who you are.”

“And if you ever fall in love, give that boy, or girl, a chance to be who they are. Good or bad. Not who that person once was, and not what you want them to be. Some people have scars that occurred long before we met them. We can't erase those, and the person they are in the future will not be who they were before those scars. As much as we would like to, we can't change them.”

“Love is not always enough. It doesn’t atone for the bad choices people have made. Love alone can't save people. Their path is one they must choose for themselves, but that doesn't mean they must walk that path alone. Love is not always enough, but sometimes it is the catalyst for change. You, my dear, are a force to be reckoned with in more ways than you understand. But to love someone, you have to allow them into your heart, as terrifying as that may be. You are worthy to be loved, Rey, no matter what choices people have made in the past to make you feel otherwise. Never forget that.”
Rey smiled, the first true smile in days, warmth of hope spreading in her chest. Hope for what, she wasn't certain, neither did she desire to contemplate it. “Thank you, Maz.”

“If you know him and truly trust Ben, tell him about those coordinates for the new base. His allegiance to the First Order might surprise you.” Before Rey could argue the preposterous idea of providing the Supreme Leader of the First Order coordinates to their new base, Maz continued, “Oh, and, Rey?”

“Yes?”

“When you see her, can you relay something to Leia for me?” Maz asked. Rey nodded. “May the Force be with you. Always.” Before Rey could ask why, the hologram fizzled away.
Chapter End Notes

Mild injury

Rey is superficially injured by acid rain
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Kylo had intended to spend the entire day in the training room working himself into exhaustion. He hadn't expected to feel Rey's pain through the Force, or break the promise to himself that he would shut her out no matter the circumstances. His weak resolve with her did not last a day before he was interrupting his training to bring her his cloak. He hadn't intended to stay and listen to her beg, or witness the sorrow in her eyes, but every moment he spent with her he was inexorably drawn to her. It had taken everything in him to walk away.

He returned to his training without the strength or desire to even lift his lightsaber. And all Kylo wanted was to forget the events of the prior twenty-four hours. It was an avalanche of consequences that had all been triggered by the appearance of a First Order recon ship on Barkhesh.

Kylo knew he should have been monitoring the outer rim situation more closely, or at least been up front with her about the possibility of search and probe missions. He understood her original fear; what was she supposed to think when a First Order ship landed at the base? But he had explained everything to her, and still she hadn’t trusted him. He knew her better than that; didn’t she know who he was?

Does she? the Force unhelpfully called him to wonder. Have you shown her who you are? Or just who you want her to see?

The thought only stoked the resentment tightening in his chest. Had he not proven to her that he would go to any length to keep her safe? She accused him of attempting to deceive her as he committed treason for her friends – anarchists he would find great satisfaction with removing from the galaxy. Then she offered herself to him as a sacrificial martyr for her friends’ lives. How could she believe, after the throne room, that all he wanted was a prisoner or a slave? He didn’t know what was worse; that after everything she had been through, she would offer herself to him like that, or that she believed he would ever consider that. He wanted her to join him, to stand with him at his side, not fall to her knees at his feet. How could she believe that he thought so little of her that he would consider her an asset to be bargained with? He told her in the throne room how much she meant to him. He showed her by killing his own master. How could she not see the sacrifices he had made for her? He would do anything for her…

Yet he was nothing to her. His use had only ever been to protect the Resistance – his enemies and terrorists of the galaxy – and yet he protected them for her. That was why she came to him on the Supremacy. Every moment they were connected was spent by her using him to save her friends, screaming at him, trying to kill him, or using him for her powers. Should he have been surprised? Everyone he had ever known only wanted him if he could be what they wanted. When he couldn’t, they abandoned or tried to murder him. Why should she be any different? There were moments – brief moments – when he thought she was. He thought that she saw more than the monster, but that was all he was, wasn’t it? What would she see in him? He was only as important as his use to her, and she... she meant more to him than she would ever know.
He could have helped her if she had chosen him to teach her. She was drowning in her darkness, and he had seen it before in himself and the others to know where it led. What had Luke done? In his fear, or hatred for Kylo, he sensed her power and refused her training; she was forced to learn the practicalities of the Force from ancient books and necessary skills from... a monster. How could he leave her in a situation that necessitated the cooperation of her enemy for knowledge of the Force? How could he not foresee her struggle with the darkness? He failed Kylo and abandoned her to the same fate. Her darkness was unlike anything he had ever felt before. She would be lost to it without guidance... and he had shut her out. Who else was left to help her fight it? Poe Dameron? The traitor? Leia? Was there anyone powerful enough to help stop the prophecy from being realized?

What was he supposed to do? Even if he could accept that his only use to her was to save her friends, their connection would only ever put her in danger, and that he couldn’t accept. Rey nearly died at the hands of Poe Dameron, for treason, and had he been in the pilot’s position with one of his subordinates, he would have made the same decision. It was war, and she was a risk as long as she had a bond with the enemy. Leia had saved her life, but she could only do so much. He had to end the bond – for her safety.

That was his misstep – he never anticipated his own weakness in ending the bond. The Order was lucky he had only destroyed one room on that ship in his... instability. Unfortunately, now Hux had the evidence he required to prove Kylo’s inadequacies as Supreme Leader. Their game of holocheess was swiftly approaching endgame, but Kylo had underestimated him. It was not as much due to his strategy as Kylo’s own oversight. He willingly stepped into his general’s trap. His fear was that he was continuing to underestimate his strategy. Perhaps his subordinate was not as incompetent as he had anticipated, and he had been scheming three steps ahead in the shadows the entire time.

Kylo had underestimated Rey as well. He never anticipated that shutting her out would deliver her to his chambers as death’s implement. From the moment he sensed her powers, he knew she would be the death of him. He imagined she would deliver his fate on the battlefield, besting him in a final duel – not in his sleep by his own weapon. He had never imagined she would use their shared bond, but that was his own oversight. He shouldn’t have trusted her.

The best advice Han had ever given him was this: “Trust no one, kid. If you go into every situation believing they’ll betray you, then you’ll never be disappointed.”

Kylo had never been good at following advice... evidently, neither was his father.

He activated the MSE-6 droid in the corner to entertain Blue, then activated the three training
droids in front of him. The droids’ lightsabers sizzled in anticipation. Kylo knew he could have used the training sabers, lined with barbs filled with temporary paralyzing agents. As painful as the training lightsabers were, he much preferred a burn to the loss of control that accompanied paralysis, unable to fight, left alone with the voices in his head. He activated his lightsaber and lifted it into his fighting stance – the weapon raised to his line of sight so he could focus on his target down the length of the blade. Exhilaration shuddered through his body.

His memories flashed to the last challenging duel he had participated in – when he had fought with Rey at his back. He had forged a brotherhood with the Knights and still, he would not turn his back to a single one of them. In that fight, he had trusted in her more than he had ever trusted anyone in his entire life. She could have easily killed him, and he would have been powerless to stop it. But he knew she wouldn't. When their eyes met before the guards descended upon them, there was a reflection of recognition in her eyes. They had both trusted in the bond when they had every reason not to. He knew she would stand by him, and she did... until he wouldn't let her use him to save the Resistance the way she wanted. A sigh signaled the dampening of his mood, and he shook the line of thinking from his mind.

If one silver lining arose from their battle in the throne room, it was that he had discovered more personal weaknesses. That glorious yet loathsome day, he had thrust his weapon into a guard but was forced to abandon it in a desperate attempt to avoid another guard's reaching swing. The result was his eventual off-balance struggle with a weapon to his throat. Had it not been for Rey...

He may have thought practically eventually, but he should never have been in the position in the first place. His weapon was an extension of himself, even if his bond to the crystal had been damaged when he bled it. In the constant battle to subjugate it, his training in the fundamentals of lightsaber duels had suffered. In his agitation, he had forgotten rule number one of lightsaber combat– the weapon was the last line of defense; never abandon it.

Kylo decided to train by using the teachings of Trakata by engaging and disengaging the lightsaber strategically during the fight instead. It would force the weapon to become second-nature in his hands again, even in his attempt to control it. This was a more trust-driven form of fighting than he was used to. It required moments of vulnerability that terrified him, but it would be a deadly move to use on an opponent when their blades were locked. A quick deactivation and reactivation would cause his opponent's weapon to fall through. If he could dodge it, that left them nothing to block with once he reengaged the blade.

He practiced relentlessly against the three droids. The most difficult part to learn was to trust that he had moved out of the other blade’s path and focus on the quick re-engagement of his own weapon. Every time he watched the path of the other weapon, rather than trusting in himself, he felt it slice into his arm guards. That distraction was always enough to leave him open to an attack on the flank. So he focused intently on trusting himself and his training, a foreign dependency.
In his concentration, his command over his weapon slipped. He noticed the sudden ease in his movements as if the lightsaber itself was guiding him. Then he realized... it was. The crystal that he had bled was cracked, the bond was damaged, but the connection was still there. He had been forcing it into submission for years, but it would have readily answered to his direction the entire time. He realized then how much stronger the bond with the crystal made him in his efforts.

That was why it responded to Rey. Her bond with him had created a bond with his crystal. She wasn't commanding it to her in the throne room, she was appealing to the trusted connection that had long survived what he had done. Why did he bleed it? Why was it important to him that he dominate something so strong? It only made him weaker, but that was Sidious's intention, wasn't it? He needed Kylo weak so he wouldn't kill him, and in his attempt to eliminate the person who had given him that strength, he sealed his fate.

What could I have been without him?

Kylo allowed the weapon to guide his movements for the first time in years. The connection was weak due to the crack in his crystal, but the trust was there, nonetheless. It came as naturally as his connection to the Force. He had betrayed it, denied it, yet it had continued to call to him. It was a forgiveness he didn't understand, but it gave him a feeling of completeness he hadn’t felt in years. He was sweating profusely, but he reveled in this release. His breathing was steady, his mind calm, his connection to the Force felt even more powerful. His muscles ached as they performed from memory; it was a dance he had long forgotten but fell back into quickly. There was no place he felt more at home than standing there with the lightsaber in his hand. His body felt electric as the power vibrated through him.

Then he realized, it wasn't power. It was her energy attempting to force through the barriers he had constructed in the bond.

No. I will not give in again.

He pushed back forcefully, but she was insistent. The bond was strong, and so was she. It was an inevitability that she would force her way through. Abruptly, he felt faint, and he realized she had made an oversight of her own. Dropping the barriers, he appeared in time to witness her collapse on the border of unconsciousness. He yearned to step forward and catch her, as he had on Takodana, but he used the Force instead.

With his hand outstretched, the Force suspended her fall only centimeters from the floor. He hated the way she watched him, the Force holding her at his mercy, as if he was anything other than the monster he was.
“What were you thinking,” he said through clenched teeth. “You could have killed yourself.” She stared up at him, eyes wide. Was it surprise? Comfort? Relief? She had nearly knocked herself unconscious attempting to bring him to her side of the galaxy. Why? No matter what she said, she didn't want him there for the company. He was certain of it. There were tears on her cheeks and a storm of emotions behind her eyes. He knew he was the cause.

She was still wearing his cloak, but her hair was… different. Part of it was still down, but the front part was pulled back into a braid. There was only one person who could have done it, and it was no accident which one she had chosen. It was a message to him, and he hated it. Abandoning his resolution to shut her out, he surrendered to his curiosities.

“You changed your hair – an Alderaanian braid,” he said. He knew she wasn’t foolish enough to deny who had done it. “Did she tell you what it means?”

“If you want to shut me out. I won't fight it anymore, Ben, I promise. Under one condition,” she begged. He had stopped her from hurting herself, breaking the promise to himself twice in one day. He knew he should leave. But if he left, what would stop her from attempting to break down the barriers again? She was promising to stop fighting if he did one last favor for her.

What is it this time? Which one of the traitors needs my help now? What treasonous act do you expect of me?

He worked his jaw in agitation, “Yes?”

“You listen to what your mother has to say.” His breath caught in his throat. Of all the favors he expected her to ask of him, speaking to his mother was not one of them. She knew what it would do to him, didn’t she?

No. I can't see Leia again, it's too late for anything she has to say. Not today. How could she do this to me? She saw everything, she saw what they did! She wouldn't use the bond like this. Would she? No, she wouldn't do this to me. This...this would be worse than trying to kill me.

He stared at Rey, silently pleading with her to take back what she had said, begging her not to betray him again. His eyes followed the stray wisps of hair framing her face to the intricate, noticeably Alderaanian braid woven in a meaningful style by expert hands. What had Leia done to make her use the bond like that?
His galaxy fell away as he perceived a quiet gasp to his left.

A stuttered breath escaped his lips as he turned, and his eyes met haunting, familiar eyes. A wave of nausea rolled through his stomach. She looked terrible – her face was drawn and pale, dark circles of exhaustion matched the ones under his own eyes. She was the strongest woman he knew, save for Rey, but she looked weak, frail, and impossibly small sitting on one of the temple's sacrificial altars. She looked as she did in his vision in the mirror. He had thought it was his own tormenting mind that made her look that way. He had done this to her, he was certain. He was slowly killing his own mother.

“You're here...” Leia's voice broke the silence. He swallowed the sob rising in his throat.
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Rey knew that she had avoided it long enough. Holding her breath, she followed C-3PO into the temple room. The woman was focused on a box in her lap. Rey watched the droid leave the room and cleared her throat. "Leia, I need to talk to you. It's about Ben."

"Come in," the general replied weakly. Leia had been steadily growing weaker, but the Force only felt stronger around the woman every time Rey saw her. Although she was a fighter, it had become
evident that Leia was fighting inevitability. She was pale, her breathing was irregular, and she was too weak to stand. Leia was the physical representation of strength in every definition of the word. To see her body fail her was a unique kind of torture, because it was altogether foreign in the woman that she knew. Rey had seen death—it was Jakku’s greatest specialty – but not like this. The desert claimed the weak or foolhardy.

She had never watched someone suffer – someone she had grown to love – especially not someone who was the strongest of them all. She had accepted death as a natural process of life on Jakku, but, since leaving, it was a more formidable pill to swallow. To watch her lifeforce slowly fading was a different, but equally tormenting, pain to endure as the loss of Han Solo. Though it was further tormenting that the people she had grown to love and respect – for as short of a time as she had known them – could not be reconciled with the people she had witnessed in Kylo’s memories. Rey knew that Kylo was a painful subject for Leia, as well as a risk to her association with the Resistance, but she could not bear the thought of hiding her connection to him any longer.

For the first time, she felt the touch of disappointment while standing before his mother. It was the same disappointment she had felt with Luke, not for her own sake, but for her bondmate. She imagined who Kylo could have become if his parents had not failed him. It was easy to blame them; to have someone to point a finger toward and lament their influence on his fall. It was easier than admitting that, ultimately, it was Kylo’s choice to fall, and Kylo’s choice to remain loyally committed to the dark side.

She reminded herself that she had not been there; she had only seen the most traumatic memories, through Kylo's perspective. Just as the truth of what happened the night Kylo burned down Luke's temple was dependent upon the perspective, so could the truth of the events that comprised his childhood. She didn't know the reason why Leia or Han made the choices they did, though it was difficult for her to comprehend how anything could have been more important than saving a struggling child from the nightmare Kylo had faced.

Perhaps it was her feelings of abandonment that she harbored toward her own parents, perhaps it was the emotions she had felt in Kylo's memories that she had empathized with all too well. Rey loved Han and Leia; they had been more like parents to her than her own parents. More like parents to me than to Ben, she thought, before realizing the sentiment was unfair to them. She knew they loved him; they were just too late in showing him in the way he needed. She breathed deeply to cleanse the resentful emotions triggering the darkness. Though Leia had failed her son when he needed her most, Rey hoped she would have the wisdom to help bring him home before it was too late.

Leia grasped her hands and tried her best to smile. “I have been hoping to speak with you as well, Rey, and I know you have been avoiding me. We can skip the formalities. I think we both know I do not have long;, this may be our last chance. Are you ready now to be honest with me?” Rey nodded, shuddering in anticipation.
“I know there is much you haven’t shared with me, secrets involving my son, and perhaps I do not
deserve to know the answers,” Leia sighed. “But I needed to tell you something... I hope it doesn’t
scare you. If you are here for the reason I think you are here... then it won’t.”

“I need to know something first,” Rey choked on a sob as tears began to pool in her eyes. “I need to
know why you sent him away when you knew the darkness he struggled with. He loved you, and
you abandoned him with a man he didn’t know. A man who feared him and – in Ben’s eyes – tried
to murder him.”

“Come sit,” Leia directed, rummaging through the box in her hands, one of only a few personal
items the woman carried with her. “May I braid your hair?”

The look in her eyes revealed a significance to the request, but Rey could only nod. No one had
ever done anything with her hair before, save for the people who had abandoned her, and her eyes
prickled with tears at the thought that Leia offered her that gift. Motioning with a comb for Rey to
sit at her feet, the older woman’s hands trembled. Rey obliged and Leia removed the tie from her
hair, sifting the strands through her fingers.

“When I was pregnant with Ben, I felt him through the Force. He felt like a bright band of light that
was sometimes split with a shadow of darkness. Luke reassured me that the deeper the darkness,
the brighter the light, and that truly was Ben. His light was the strongest I had ever felt in anyone.
He loved fiercely. But for as long as I can remember, he also struggled with darkness, hearing
whispers from the Force. He said he heard many different voices calling to him, and I thought….

“Luke told me it was normal, he had heard whispers from many people in the Force. I knew Ben
had a strong connection to the Force, too, but I never studied it in-depth as my brother did; I never
considered what those whispers could mean. Ben has always been introspective and solitary; he
never wanted to talk about the voices, but I noticed some disturbed him. One more than others. I
could sense his fear at night when he was alone, or when he would suddenly stop playing and
begin to scream at an empty room. I began to wonder if the darkness I felt surrounding him was
entirely his,” Leia’s fingers hesitated in her hair for a moment, and Rey glanced up as a tear tracked
down her aged face. She immediately turned away, ashamed that she had interrupted Leia’s
vulnerable moment. It was the most emotional Rey had ever seen the woman. Leia parted her hair,
but only pulled back the front pieces. She began weaving the locks of Rey’s hair with expert
hands.

“I think I had a chance to stop it,” she whispered, and Rey wondered at first if she was meant to
hear it. “Ben lashed out at him at a Senate dinner years before we sent him away. He cut his face
open with cutlery from the table and ran away. He stole a speeder to escape that monster. Ben led
the authorities on a chase that could have killed him, but I was so concerned with how it would
make me look in the eyes of the Senate, that I didn’t stop to think why he did that. Snoke didn’t
want to press charges; he wanted time alone with my son. I thought he would teach him a lesson,
force him to clean his office or something equally tedious. I should have known something was wrong when Ben came back from his visit with Snoke and couldn’t remember that dinner at all. At the time, I convinced myself he was just embarrassed by his behavior. I never… it has haunted me since the day I learned Ben left to join Snoke, what that creature could have done to my son when I was too busy to listen.”

Leia paused for a moment when her voice broke. She struggled to remain strong, but Rey wished she knew she didn’t have to be. “I never told Han, but Snoke visited me at the Senate one day. It was probably too late, even then. I have no idea how long Snoke had access to him. Years? Snoke confessed to contacting Ben, having an interest in Ben’s power, and suggested that I send my son to him for ‘training’ in the Force. When I refused, he threatened to turn my son against me. All I could think about was how my father, his grandfather, had been turned. I was… scared. I knew Ben was vulnerable. He was only a child, and I was not knowledgeable enough in the Force to stop Snoke.”

“That was why I sent him to Luke. Ben never wanted to be a Jedi. He would have made a passionate Senator in the New Republic, or a great pilot like his father, as much as I disliked the idea at the time. Isn’t that the cruelty of life? I would give anything now for him to have become exactly like his father. I thought if he trained with Luke, he would be too strong for Snoke to manipulate. If Luke could save our… father, whose cold heart had already been turned, then certainly he could save my sweet boy with the biggest heart I know. I regret sending him with every breath I take, because that is when I lost him. I knew he would never make a good Jedi; I knew he would fail. As his mother, I knew it better than anyone. Everything in me told me it was a mistake, but I was too scared to listen.”

“I knew the strict rules of the Jedi Order would set him up to fail. Ben was... driven by his strong emotions, he felt everything in extremes. He had more love in his heart than he knew what to do with. He was too needy, passionate and sensitive to live without deep connections. He was too desperate for love to become a Jedi. Han and I – we were too young and focused on our own problems to figure out how to give him what he needed. Luke did his best, but he had to fulfill a role that couldn’t provide that love, either. There is a thin veil between love and hate, and when he felt like he had nowhere to put that love, well, Snoke turned that love into hate, and created Kylo Ren.”

She said it with such resignation, such remorse, that Rey found her own vision growing blurry with unshed tears. She could feel the love Leia had for her son, even after all he had done. She had never heard Leia voice life to that name before, never believed she would, but with those two words bled all the heartache that name had caused her to suffer.

“Ben always struggled with darkness, like his grandfather. We were so fearful of what the knowledge of the identity of his grandfather would do to him, what ammunition it would give Snoke, that we waited and waited until it was too late. I wish I had told him sooner. Or let Luke tell him; he has far more compassion for our father. I was scared. I loved my son, but I saw the darkness in him, and it reminded me too much of... him. The man had given life to me, but he had tortured me and ordered the death of my only family. I hated my father, not my son, but I didn’t
realize – or didn’t want to realize – how that hate had left little room for anything else.

“I could only see Vader in my own son, and I found myself disgusted by my own bloodline. I couldn’t bear telling him. By the time I tried, it was too late. He never received my message; he was already gone. The whispers had turned him against us. It had been Snoke the whole time; he had been stealing my son away from me for years, maybe even from the moment he was born, molding him into what he wanted him to be. And he did it right in front of my eyes. In my fear, I played right into his hand. By the time Han found him, it was too late. Han always knew he wasn’t going to die of old age. I think he would have wanted it to mean something. He died trying to save his boy. I think even if he knew how it would end, he would have done it anyway.”

There was a silence that grew between them, as Leia’s hands stilled in her hair, and flashes of that fateful moment on the skyway replayed in Rey’s mind. With a long exhale, Leia began working diligently on her hair again. “We tried to be there for him, but we weren’t there for him the way he needed, does that makes sense? If I had been honest, shared my own darkness, maybe we could have battled it together. I knew I had reason to worry about the future of the Republic, but I never thought…

...the greatest threat to the Republic would come from within your own home?

“I never thought Han and Ben would think I cared more about the galaxy. They were my galaxy. I think the hardest part for me to accept is that Ben would do this. He cared about the galaxy; I never thought he was capable of this. If I had just been there the way he needed, maybe he’d be here with us. Maybe I would be preparing him to become our next general right now.”

Rey thought about what it would have been like if it all had ended differently. Would it have Ben and Han who brought Rey to Takodana? Would he have helped Finn come back for her? Would they still have formed a bond? Would Han be alive?

She imagined him walking down the corridors with Finn, discussing – arguing – strategies as allies. She imagined him competing with Poe for the title of "best pilot in the Resistance.” She imagined him having long, philosophical talks with Rose. She imagined him laughing as he worked on the Millennium Falcon with Han and Chewbacca. She imagined Luke, happy and at peace, training them together. She imagined sitting alone by the fire with him, without the conflict of war pulling them apart. Would there be a war at all? It ached painfully to imagine. “If he was here,” Rey said, stumbling through the words as they wavered under the weight of her sorrow, “do you still believe we would be fighting the First Order?”

“Ben had little to do with the formation of the First Order,” Leia replied softly. “Snoke would have found another apprentice. If Ben hadn’t fallen, I believe he still would have been Snoke’s target. That monster would have stopped at nothing to take him from us; by betrayal… or by death.”
Rey thought about Jacen, the other Knights, Darth Maul, and the other unknowns he had his sight set on to build his army. Snoke had chosen Ben because of his powerful bloodline, but if he hadn’t turned, destroying Luke and especially Ben would have become that monster’s obsession. What if Snoke had found her – Ben’s equal in the Force?

Rey was drawn back to the pain of the present as Leia secured the braid.

“There,” she said warmly, as if the last few moments hadn’t happened. She handed Rey a portable mirror. Rey turned her head from side to side to appreciate the intricate Alderaanian braid that wrapped around her head. Where Leia’s braid had topped her head like a crown, most of Rey’s hair was down, falling in soft waves as it had before; but the front pieces were woven on either side of her head and came together in the back. It looked so seamless, so elaborately braided, that she couldn’t tell where one side ended and the other began. Rey smiled, something about it reminding her of a warm embrace. It wasn’t until Leia wiped a tear from her cheek that Rey realized she had been crying. A sob bubbled in her throat. It was all too much – how beautiful she felt, how wanted, how appreciative she was of a woman who was dying, how much she missed this woman’s son, and how selfish that felt when his mother hadn’t seen him in years.

There was one last thing she couldn’t let go. “Leia, how old was he when he fell?”

“I don’t know.” The sorrow deepened in the older woman’s eyes. “With their travels, it wasn’t unusual for us to go without long periods of contact… twenty-three, possibly twenty-four.”

_That’s it. You couldn’t have killed them, Ben._


“Rey, that’s not your burden to bear. You didn’t fail, because it’s always only been up to him. No one can make the choice to turn for him. You gave him a chance to turn when no one else would. You killed the monster who took him from us.” The woman smiled at her genuinely, despite her silent acknowledgment that she had known all along the secrets that Rey had hidden from her. As it turned out, Rey had only _thought_ she had successfully hidden it from her. “You did what I was not strong enough to do. Even if Ben never comes home, I can have peace in knowing that the creature who tormented my son is gone.”

“I didn't kill Snoke, Leia.”
Leia studied her for a moment, and Rey was reminded of another pair of warm, brown eyes. They were the same fierce, stubborn, intelligent, jaded eyes as the ones she had memorized over the past few weeks. She could only imagine the intense staring matches that took place between those two. “Rey, the bounty…”

“Ben did it,” Rey smiled wanly. She began slowly unrolling the wraps around her arms. “Snoke ordered him to kill me, and Ben killed Snoke instead. He saved my life. We fought the Praetorian guard together, we were on the same side. I could feel him and what he was going to do and what he needed. It was like a dance I had practiced my entire life. There were eight guards, but I survived with this.” She turned to show Leia the scar that cut across her arm like a brand; a reminder of the bond at its best, and only moments later, its worst. Her smile faded. “I thought I had saved him, but he chose power. He asked me to join him to rule the galaxy instead of saving the Resistance. So I left. But he's still in there; I know it. There is still hope, and I won't give up on him.”

“I sensed that more happened between you after some things you asked after Crait, but I don’t understand; my son asked you to rule with him? After what happened between you on Starkiller? Why?”

“When we touched hands on Ahch-To, he saw a vision that made him believe I would stand by his side,” Rey said quietly, struggling to suppress the disappointment that threatened to leak down her cheeks. “But I saw a vision of his future, a vision where he turned.”

Intrigue settled over Leia's exhausted features. “You touched hands… on Ahch-To?”

“Yes, I didn’t tell you, because it’s complicated, and I was scared of what it would mean for me here. But I see Ben all the time. That night when I asked if you knew if he was alive, he had been here. Poe almost saw him, and I kissed Poe to distract him. He saw Poe kiss me and nearly got himself killed in his anger. And when the recon ship landed? Ben warned me that killing them would be a trap, more would come if they went missing. And Ben is the one who gave me a vial to destroy his new clone army if he is killed. He saved me from a creature in the rainforest, and he gave me this cloak today to protect me from the acid rain….”

“He's here?” Leia cut in with renewed hope. “I know I thought I felt him, but it's impossible, he…”

“Ben and I have a Force Bond, Leia,” Rey admitted hesitantly, refusing to look his mother in the eyes. “I can see him, talk to him, touch him, feel his emotions, even feel his pain across the galaxy. I have seen his memories. I saw him as a child, and the pain and regret he felt when Han died. I saw the moment he couldn't kill you on the Raddus and felt his love for you. I know who he is. He
is not Kylo Ren.”

Leia gently tilted the young woman’s face to search her eyes. “Rey, I know he’s my son, and you have reason to save him, but you have to understand that this bond could have very real consequences as long as he is Supreme Leader of the First Order. I need you to be honest with me – is he a threat to the Resistance?”

“That’s not an easy answer,” she replied with tears in her eyes. Leia read the truth in them as effortlessly as her son could.

“If he is,” she said, decoding the fear she had witnessed, “I hope you understand the unfortunate position you have been fated, Rey. You are the one the Force has chosen to stand between these good people and Ben’s terrible choices. I need to know you’ll do what’s right, even if it’s the hardest thing you’ll ever have to do.”

Rey nodded, scrubbing at her eyes. If Kylo threatened the lives of her friends, she knew what she had to do. The Force had bonded her to him; she had the best chance to help save him, but if he made the choice he had thus far refused to make, she was also the best chance to help stop him. “If he makes that choice, then I’ll protect the Resistance. But I know him, Leia; I have hope.”

“Rey, how long has this been going on?”

Rey considered her question for a moment. She still had a lifetime of knowledge to learn about the Force and the bond that connected her with their enemy. Though she supposed she would never know the exact moment their bond had formed, as there had been many stages that had led to the complexity their connection had become, she could at least admit it was an easier question to answer than why it had formed. “I don’t know. I had a vision of him when I touched Luke’s lightsaber, and that was before we ever met. When Ben kidnapped me, he searched my mind, so I pushed back and we felt this... connection. I was able to draw from his power and skills after that on Starkiller. Then on Ahch-To, we were able to see each other even though we were star systems away. We could talk to each other, and I realized that he was just as alone as I was. He understood me better than anyone ever has. Snoke said he created the bond, but I think it was there before. There are moments when I wonder if he knew about me before all this.”

“I think you’re right.”

It was Rey's turn to be confused. “About what?”
“I told you about the whispers that plagued Ben's childhood. But in the darkness, there was this light. For as long as I can remember he would have dreams of a little girl. He told me that he didn’t know her name, but he was convinced the dreams were from the Force. She was sad and lonely, but she would still give him hope. He said his favorite thing about her was her eyes. He told me they looked like the sun. He held on to that dream through his darkest moments. I am sure by now you have heard the quote that so many attribute to me: 'Hope is like the sun. If you only believe it when you see it, you'll never make it through the night.' I learned that from Ben. He would wake up from horrible nightmares, and he would repeat that to himself over and over. His hope was that dream, that girl, in a nightmare of darkness that he struggled against. I thought it was an overactive imagination of a lonely boy.” Leia paused, wiping the tears with shaking hands.

“I don’t know why, Rey, and maybe it is a hope of a dying mother who just wants her son to come home. But I can’t help but notice the way the golden flecks in your eyes shine like rays of the sun. And I thought maybe, just maybe, you were more than the hope for the Resistance. Maybe you were Ben’s hope all along.”

Tears burned Rey’s cheeks. She remembered his eyes studying her in awe in the interrogation room. *Something. There is something... Who are you?* he had asked her.

Then she recalled his face on Starkiller when she had summoned Luke’s lightsaber. *It is you,* he had said, with that look like he knew more about her than she knew herself. What if he had known her all along? There was something about it that rang true, but there was something stronger inside her screaming that it was all wrong. She didn’t remember a single one of those dreams, she couldn’t have been that girl. She had been a nothing, scavenger girl on Jakku. She hadn’t been his enemy then. Why would the Force connect her to him?

The one part she couldn’t deny was the Force had eventually chosen to connect them. Their Force Bond. Their visions. Their string of fate had been woven together for reasons Rey couldn’t understand. Was it such a stretch that their connection through the Force had existed their entire lives?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a small, ornate box that Leia placed in her hands. Rey searched the woman's eyes for the meaning, but Leia only nodded toward the box. She opened the box, and the room was filled with the soft notes of a lullaby—a lullaby Rey knew well. Leia began to sing:

“Mirrorbright, shines the moon,

its glow as soft as an ember

When the moon is mirrorbright,

take this time to remember
Those you have loved but are gone
Those who kept you so safe and warm
The mirrorbright moon lets you see
Those who have ceased to be
Mirrorbright shines the moon,
as fires die to their embers
Those you love are with you still-
The moon will help you remember.”

“It is an Alderaanian lullaby I learned from my mother named ‘Mirrorbright.’ I sang it to my son… and he sang it to the sad little girl in his dreams.” Leia observed Rey carefully before speaking again. “You know that song.”

Could she have been the little girl in his visions? Was the idea of it that absurd? After witnessing his memories, she knew he was the little boy in hers.

“Why didn't he tell me?” Rey choked on a sob, “What have I done?” Leia waited for her to elaborate, with an understanding but expectant expression on her weary face.

Rey sighed, hastily wiping the tears from her swollen cheeks. “Leia. Snoke found me. I know he's dead; I can't explain it. I thought his whispers were the Force, but I know it was him now. He has been attempting to turn me against Ben; he almost convinced me to kill him. I didn't do it, but I betrayed him, and he shut me out. I won't give up on him, but he gave up on me.”

Leia's eyes were more forgiving than Rey felt she deserved. “Does he know about Snoke?”

“No, I couldn't do that to him.”

“Ben has never been very efficient at communicating his feelings, but from what I know about you, my dear, neither have you,” Leia chuckled dryly. “Give it time. Force bonds are not easy to create, and they are even more challenging to break. I believe fate will bring you together again. Demand the truth from him. The whole truth. Because for every thought Ben says aloud, there are a hundred others bouncing around that brilliant mind of his. And in exchange, tell him everything you have told me. I think the truth is something you both deserve to hear. I have hope that you can do what I never could – bring him home. And if he does come home, please tell him I love him
and I'm sorry.”

Without a thought to the consequences, Rey made her decision. “No, you should be able to tell him yourself.”

“Rey, don't,” Leia warned.

Ben! she screamed into the bond, shoving against the obstinate, durasteel wall that was his energy in her mind.

Ben!

His side of the bond had returned to the blocked state it had been earlier in the day when she screamed at him relentlessly in the forest. Leia watched her intently, a combination of fear, sorrow, and anticipation bringing life back to her weary eyes.

Ben Organa-Solo you will let me in this instant! You will talk to your mother!

If he wanted to be stubborn, she would show him how stubborn she could be. She closed her eyes and focused on his energy. She forced everything she had at the wall of their bond, refusing to relent until he let her through. He pushed back against her, and she knew he was actively fighting her, but that meant that she was forcing her way in. She was so focused on breaking down his walls that she didn’t understand what the energy expenditure was doing to her physically.

Rey didn’t notice when she began to sway. It was not until she felt the ground rising up to meet her that she realized her oversight. She expected to feel her head crack against the stone surface of the temple room floor, but she found herself hovering only centimeters above it. She glanced up to see her bondmate with fear furrowing his brow, his hand outstretched as he held her with the Force. The smile that warmed her face was entirely involuntary.

“What were you thinking,” he growled. “You could have killed yourself.” His eyes studied her face, then followed the braid in her hair. His expression softened slightly as his eyes came to rest on her bare arms and the cloak she was still wearing.

“You changed your hair – an Alderaanian braid,” he said, and his implication was clear enough. My mother, his face said plainly. It was more bitter than wistful, and Rey wondered if she
had made the right decision. “Did she tell you what it means?”

Rey reminded herself that he was there for a reason, she owed it to Leia. “If you want to shut me out. I won't fight it anymore, Ben, I promise. Under one condition,” she begged.

He worked his jaw in agitation, “Yes?”

“You listen to what your mother has to say.” His eyes flickered with confusion, then sorrow, then anger. It wasn't until he took stock of his surroundings, that the fear ignited in them. His lips parted, and his pupils grew as his head whipped in search of the other presence in the room. The eyes of mother and son locked into a silent connection. The only sound in the room was the heavy breaths of the three force-sensitives and the staccato of her heartbeat in Rey's ears. She prepared herself for his, likely, extreme reaction. Either she would bring him home to his mother, or Kylo would destroy the room in his anger and set course to Barkhesh.

“You're here...” Leia's voice broke the shock. Kylo flinched at the familiar sound, squaring his shoulders and clearing his throat. They both stared at each other in a fragile silence, absorbing the details that unkind years had rendered upon them both. Rey could only watch in anticipation as the seconds ticked by, wondering if the unspoken words overflowing in the void were friend or foe to the threadbare relationship between mother and son.

“Thank you,” he said hoarsely, his breath uneven, his eyes focused on the corner of the room. “For saving her life.” Rey was stunned into silence that he had spoken to his mother, kindly. Should she dare have hope?

“Ben... oh, my Ben,” Leia whispered. Her eyes were filled with love and relief. He was across the room from her, across the galaxy, but she lifted her hand and reached for him, yearning to touch her son.

He scowled as he stepped forward, his voice low to control the trembling. “No, don't... after everything I’ve done. Don't say that name as if I have any significance to you anymore. Not that I ever did...”

Leia's hand remained outstretched, her energy in the Force fading, but Rey had never felt someone so strong in the face of a lifetime of suffering. She was the strongest person Rey had ever known. “Ben, you have always been everything to me, even if I didn’t show it. I forgive you.”
“You do?” His voice became hardened and defensive, but his feet betrayed him as he stepped closer. “Like you forgave the monster that was your father?”

Leia took his defensiveness in stride. “It took me thirty years, but I forgive him, too. I was forced to face the truth when you turned to darkness. I see him differently now. Because of you. He found the light at the end; it is not too late for you. Death was your grandfather’s redemption, but it does not have to be yours.”

“But I killed him,” his voice cracked. All three people in that room – connected by destiny, kinship and the Force – knew whose name he refused to say. Kylo’s eyes were pleading with his mother to hate him as he had long believed she did.

“Your father forgives you too, Ben,” Leia’s voice wavered, but her assured and sincere expression did not. She tilted her head up as he towered over her. When she reached for his hand, he didn’t back away. Both Leia and Rey gasped as her fingers clasped onto his solid hand. He didn’t return the gesture, but he allowed her hand to remain dwarfed in his.

His explosive emotions collided together in the bond in an intensity Rey had not witnessed in him before. His energy in the Force was erratic, his ordinarily sharp edges were in a distorted, jumbled chaos. There was a tension, a taut, wrenching sensation, drawing energy toward Ben. She felt weakness in her own knees and realized he was using the Force as a crutch. He needed the strength to remain standing. She had to stop herself from crossing the room and embracing him. If she knew that if it would not further agitate him, she would have.

Kylo was nothing but capricious facing his mother. Rey expected him to react with the volatile emotions churning just below the surface. But when he spoke, his voice was enervated and weary. They were words of a broken man. “I don't deserve forgiveness.”

“Forgiven is not about what you deserve, Ben, and it is not your choice,” Leia murmured, a weary smile gracing her worn features. “I love you; your father and I have always loved you. All I can do is ask for your forgiveness. I had no idea what Luke did to you. I wish I had known, because I would have protected you – from Snoke, and my own brother. I’ll still protect you, Ben, if you come home.”

He refused to look at either of them as he focused on her hand in his. His body was rigid and tense, like a band stretched too far, ready to snap. His lip quivered as he shook his head. He was falling apart, and they all knew it. He couldn’t hide behind his anger anymore. Leia didn’t relent. “It was you, wasn’t it? Who wrote the note that saved my life on Hosnian Prime?”
Rey was surprised when he answered with a nod. Kylo looked as if he would collapse to his knees any second. He was so close. If she could just convince him to look at his mother – to see the love, hope, and forgiveness in her eyes – then she knew the strong façade would break. He would break. And she would help him put himself back together again. They both would.

*I’ll help you.*

Leia’s next words were shattering, but not in the way Rey hoped. “Do you remember what today is?”

“Don’t,” Kylo shook his head, his eyes were glistening with unshed tears. “I can't... I can't do this.” Before either woman could say another word, he disappeared with a snap of the Force, jolting the other two women in the room with its finality. Leia’s outstretched hand fell to her side, empty. It was clear he needed time, but that was something they couldn’t afford.

*Ben, don’t do this!* Rey shouted into the bond. *You can still fix this before it's too late. I know you couldn't kill her, I know you don't hate her, I know you still love her. Please, let her say what needs to be said!* Her desperation collided with the hurricane of emotions that were coursing through the bond. She expected to be overwhelmed by his rage, but the strongest emotion was... longing.

*No. You don’t understand. You don’t know. Here's what I know; I know people don't always get storybook endings, I know sometimes people are just too broken, I know sometimes ties are too far gone to be saved. I don’t hate her, Rey, but even if I could forgive her, I can't forgive myself for what I've done to her. I can’t look at her without reliving all of it. That's reality. Please, just let it go. Do you have any idea what you have done to me? Killing me would have been kinder.* As he slammed his walls up again, Rey felt as if those words were meant for her as much as his mother. As more tears fell from her red-rimmed eyes, she turned in disappointment to Leia.

“I’m so sorry,” Rey sobbed. “I thought I could bring him back to you.”

“You did, Rey. You did. Thirty years ago today, I gave birth to him, and now I got to see him one last time. You gave that to me,” the older woman smiled, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. “My sweet boy. I saw it in his eyes, my Ben is still in there. But what did Snoke do to him? I barely recognized my own son.” Leia knew of the scars Rey had left upon him, of course, but she did not have the heart to tell her of the torture he suffered at Snoke's hand. It was a burden she believed his mother did not need to bear, nor was it her story to tell. The woman was trembling, and Rey removed the cloak from around her own shoulders.
“This is Ben's,” she sniffled, wrapping the cloak around the grieving mother. Leia stroked the soft material lovingly, closing her eyes as she breathed in the scents on the cloak. Some were new and foreign, of course, to a mother who had not seen her son for most of his adult life, but there was a familiarity there, Rey could tell by the contented smile that fleetingly crossed Leia's face.

She turned to Rey as realization settled over her face. “Perhaps it was real?”

“What was?” Rey asked, confusion evident on her face.

“When we first arrived on Barkhesh, you held my hand as I fell asleep. I had a dream of my Ben, it felt real, I could even see the scar running down the right side of his face. What he told me was painful, but true. And he talked about you, Rey. He begged me to keep you safe. I have never heard my son speak of anyone as he spoke of you. The look in his eyes... It was a look I remember well, from his father. He’ll be angry, Rey, but I saw the truth; he does care.” Leia dried her cheeks with shaking fingers. “Thank you. It felt like I had my Ben here with me again.”

Rey’s mind returned to the beautiful thoughts of what could have been. If the confrontation between mother and son proved anything, it was that her fantasy of Ben at the Resistance would never come to pass. It wasn’t fair. Leia should have had her husband and her brother and her son sitting there with her. Not a nobody. Rey wondered if Ben had become the Jedi he was meant to be, what would have happened to her? In his obsession with destroying the Skywalkers, would Snoke have found Rey through her connection with Ben? What if he had chosen her because of her nothingness, because he knew there was no family to turn her? What if he turned the slave of the New Republic against them as Palpatine had done to his grandfather? She no longer held the delusion that she was untouchable against the darkness. Snoke had already been in her head and nearly convinced her to kill Kylo. What else could he have convinced her to do? Would she have become the Resistance’s greatest threat?

Maybe it would have been better that way; if I had fallen. Then Ben could have had his family.

Leia seemed to sense the direction of her dark thoughts. “Rey, if Ben was here… I fear Snoke would have already found a way to kill him. Or he would have found us all through him. If Ben never killed Snoke on the Supremacy, the Supreme Leader would have found us on Crait. If Luke didn’t confront Ben to distract them, and you weren’t in the Falcon, then we wouldn’t have made it off Crait. We must have hope, Rey, in the design of the Cosmic Force, and your connection. I don’t believe the Force brought you together by accident. His connection with you is dangerous, but am I wrong in my understanding that he tried to protect you from those stormtroopers that landed at the base?”

Rey shook her head.
“Then your connection is also the best chance we’ve had since they destroyed the New Republic.” Rey took a steadying breath; it felt as if the weight of the galaxy was on her shoulders. Did the fate of... everyone lie with whether or not she could turn Ben? “Luke told me, ‘No one is ever really gone,’” Leia continued. “I love my son, and I still believe he has light left in him. But if losing Ben to darkness was the key to saving this galaxy, then I would choose that over watching my Jedi son die with the Resistance at the hands of another empire. So would Han. Maybe that was why the Force chose us to be his parents.”

“There is nothing I want more in the entire galaxy than to save him,” Rey said softly, her heart aching for both mother and son. “I want you to know that you're right, your Ben is still in there. I've seen his light. I've felt his heart. I promise I will never give up on him. But how, Leia, how do I help him save himself?”

Leia patted Rey's hand gently and smiled knowingly up at her with tears in her eyes. Rey waited. She waited for wisdom... for guidance... for hope... for anything, but nothing ever came. The Force seemed to grow even stronger around the woman for a moment, and Rey finally realized what it was she had been sensing in Leia since they left Crait. Leia was gathering its strength to delay the inevitable, she was using the Force to fight death. She had likely been using it since the Raddus for the strength to carry on in the fight for as long as she could. Even a woman as strong as Leia, however, couldn’t hold on forever. She hadn’t left them in their time of need when survival looked bleak. She fought with everything in her just to stay alive until she knew they had a chance. It was a feat that should have been impossible; but if anyone could do it, Leia could. The loss of her brother couldn’t have made it easy, or perhaps Luke had been by her side to support her through her final fight. Either way, as the heavy concentration of Force around her dissipated, Rey realized that she was letting go.

Leia closed her eyes and sighed. Rey didn’t have to reach out into the Force to know that her heartbeat was fading. A powerful, warming light soothed her soul. She felt like a million flowers were blowing in the breeze through her heart. Beautiful vibrations like music surrounded her and dissipated into the light. She was overwhelmed with happiness, love, and peace. There was a heaviness in the energy of the Force around her, and, for an instant, she felt two strong presences in the room.

The energy enveloped her, warmed her, then peacefully drifted away. Kylo's cloak that had been wrapped around his mother's shoulders dropped gently onto the empty cot. Rey sobbed quietly as the only mother figure she had ever truly known disappeared into the Force. Leia Organa Solo... princess of Alderaan... senator of the New Republic... general of the Resistance... daughter of Anakin and Padme Skywalker, and Bail and Breha Organa...wife of Han Solo... mother of Ben Solo... hope of the galaxy...was gone.

“May the Force be with you... Always,” Rey whispered through tears. From somewhere across the galaxy she felt the emotional implosion as a son collapsed.
Chapter End Notes

Major Character Death

It is not graphic, character disappears into the Force. This is not a surprise death.
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The Force snapped, and Kylo was returned to his training room. His back collapsed against the wall as he tried to steady his heaving gasps. He never expected he would see her again. Why would Rey do that to him? Didn’t she consider how that would destroy him? How could she not warn him that his strong, iron-willed mother looked so... broken? What had he done to her? His mind supplied the answer, of course; he had taken her husband and brother from her, what should he have expected? Not love. Why did that make it even harder?

*She abandoned me, she *lied to me, I was just a burden, a monster* - how could she still look at me like that after everything? *She was relieved to see me. Why?*

He screamed out into the room, igniting the lightsaber with trembling hands. "Go home, Blue!" he commanded his droid. He knew what he needed, and he refused to allow the astromech to witness it. The droid sensed the ferocity of his tone and complied immediately. When the room was empty, he turned to the training droids.

Kylo enabled all three with a wave of his hand.

The training had faded, however. Kylo launched a deadly assault against the droids. They were designed for both offensive and defensive maneuvers, but he knew their weaknesses. It would not be a fair fight. Skewering the weapon straight through the first droid, he launched it across the room. It shattered into pieces as it struck a wall. The second was easily decapitated with the momentum as he pivoted. It dropped to the floor in a shower of sparks. The third forced him to parry a few attacks, but he swung his lightsaber above his head and with a perfectly timed deactivation he brought it through the droid’s defenses. His blade severed the droid in half, and it crashed to the floor with a dull thud, smoking from its inner chambers.

He roared in dominance, his back arched, his face raised to the heavens. The primal war cry reverberated off the walls of the training hall. His chest heaved as he took stock of the destruction around him. He sighed in contentment. It felt like nothing could diminish that feeling of triumph and conquest. The universe took it as a challenge, however, as the universe always seemed to do with him.

He realized his victorious moment would be short-lived as the energy around him changed. He felt an overwhelming tranquility settle over him. The Force felt... heavy. It was the same heavy sensation he had perceived moments after Luke had disappeared on Crait. He felt an abrupt breeze gently tousle his hair. He felt *her* presence. Not Rey. His mother. The energy warmed him as his blood ran cold. He choked on his breath.
He knew.

No.

Sensing her energy around him, he froze. Even after all those years, he would recognize it anywhere. He felt love, regret, and forgiveness gently envelop him. For a moment, he felt the peace he had long sought. Then, like a flame extinguished by the wind, she was gone. He closed his eyes to the galaxy, but he couldn’t shut this out. His hands trembled, his breath came in short pants, and his sight blurred. He was desperate to be wrong.

The truth, however, hit him like a blaster bolt to the stomach. There was no denying the devastating loss of her energy in the Force. She was gone. Leia Organa Solo was gone.

His mother was dead.

I killed her.

Thousands of memories, many he had attempted to repress, exploded in his mind, each one splintering into the depths of his soul. He first remembered her fearful eyes when she had seen the destruction he had ravaged in his room after an especially terrifying bout of nightmares. It was then that he realized the only person who ever believed in him was scared of him and all he could think of was not you, too.

He remembered the sting of her hand on his cheek as she slapped him, jolting him back to his senses after he had snapped and thrown his father against the wall with the Force. It was an act of betrayal in his eyes, choosing the man who was screaming belligerently at her over her own son who had come to her defense.

He remembered the polite, but curt words she used in the presence of the other Senate members, explaining again why she was too busy to hear about his problems. It had happened in a moment of weakness, when he had almost broken down and told her about what that creature had whispered in his head. He never made that mistake again.

He remembered the sound of a slight snuffle as she lay on her bed, the only sign she was crying, as he sat next to her and comforted her. “Just go!” he screamed at his father, the object of her sorrow, who was standing remorsefully in the doorway.
He remembered the lonely nights when he could almost hear her voice, as he stared up at the stars in search of her ship, waiting for her to come back to him. To come back home from the long Senate meetings, to come back from her travels, to come back to the Jedi temple, to come back for him after he'd fallen, to care enough about her son to bring him home.

Those were the easy memories to remember, but, as his grief crashed through his resolve, he remembered more.

He remembered her soft fingers as she guided his hands to create swift strokes of ink across the parchment, an encouraging smile playing on her lips as he groaned in irritation. “Better you than me, kid,” his father chuckled from across the room.

He remembered her lulling voice, both staring up at the stars through his window, as she sang him lullabies and recalled the fantastic adventures of his father while he was away. Sometimes his father would join the storytelling on a holocall. His favorite was their love story, though neither could agree quite how it happened. “...And I called him a 'scruffy-looking, nerf herder,”’ she said. “That's when I knew she loved me back,” his father replied, mirth beaming in his eyes.

He remembered the praise in her eyes as she counted the complicated steps of the Alderaanian royal dance, her patience calming when he clumsily tripped on his gangly limbs again. If his father walked in, he would suddenly have something he desperately needed help with on the Falcon. His mother would roll her eyes, fix the older man with a reproachful stare, but allow his father to rescue him. It took him years to figure out that his father never actually needed his help.

He remembered her joyful laughter as his father and Uncle Chewie taught him to fly out of the atmosphere for the first time. Chewie sat next to him, calmly barking directions. He laughed hysterically as his father shouted warnings behind him, knuckles white as he gripped the back of his chair. His mother smiled and said, “Now you know how I feel flying with you and the walking carpet over here.”

He remembered her warm embrace as he cried in shame, having destroyed an irreplaceable heirloom at the Museum of the Republic with his untamed power in the Force. They were banned, and he thought it was because of him. He later found out it was because his father punched the curator in the nose, though no one ever told him why.

And he remembered the tears, the first time he had ever truly seen her cry - when she promised she would come back, when she told him it wasn't goodbye forever... but it was forever. He would never see her again, save for once in a courtyard on Hosnian Prime, and what Rey just forced upon him through the bond.
It didn't seem real. He had *just* seen her. She had talked to him, she was alive. Then he had run from his past – again – and his mother was gone because of it. The past was dead. He finally got exactly what he had wanted all this time. It was over. And that meant nothing to him in the face of what he lost.

There was no freedom from the conflict as his former master had promised. He had lost the people who had abandoned and betrayed him. He had been tormented for years over what they had done to him. Yet nothing compared to the torment he felt when he lost them.

*When will I be free? Why do I still… why do I still love them?*

His knees buckled under the weight of what he lost. He collapsed to the floor in a heap amidst the debris of the droids spread haphazardly around him. Tears blinded him as he reached out for the comfort of anything near him. He found the robotic hand of a fallen droid and grasped it desperately, squeezing until the physical pain took over. He hummed softly to himself, and the long-repressed tune of an old Alderaanian lullaby was the only sound in the training room.
Chapter End Notes

Mild violence

Kylo is slapped in a memory after he Force-shoves his father

Kylo destroys training droids
Red Dawn

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes
What was left of the Resistance gathered solemnly in the immense underground hall of the temple. After holding a small, quiet, but deeply moving funeral for Leia – all they could give her without risking their own safety – Poe Dameron stood before them to address the hopeless rebels.

"When I think of General Leia, I think of hope. She was the embodiment of hope, and it’s easy to believe that when she took her last breath, hope died with her. But the essence of Leia did not die
with her body. Leia is the Resistance. We are her legacy. As long as the Resistance keeps fighting, then Leia's legacy is alive.

“I stand before you and ask you to have faith in me as you did Leia; everything in me is for this cause, for Leia. I will finish what she started. We will end this war now! We will not bow down! We will not give in! We will not stop until we pry back our galaxy from their dead, cold grip. We will continue to inspire as Leia inspired, giving courage to the beaten and downtrodden to take arms against the enslavement of our galaxy. We are the spark that will burn down the First Order.

“Over the past few hours, Leia's passing has ignited a spark across the galaxy against the evil of this war machine. The civilizations sitting idly by, waiting to be saved, have realized that their freedom is now in their own hands. We are finally receiving support from systems around the galaxy. We will be combining our forces for the ultimate stand against tyranny. We will not run away any longer! Let's give 'em a war!” he shouted.

The small group erupted in cheers, the cacophony echoing off the temple walls, intensifying the sound. Rey imagined it reverberated like a crowd of thousands. She studied Poe in admiration. He had made his mistakes, but he was the leader the Resistance desperately needed in that uncertain time.

As the cheers subsided, he continued. "Our moment is now, and I have a plan. We will save tonight to mourn Leia. It’s what she deserves. But an hour ago an ally arrived to assist us in preparations to relocate, and time is of the essence,” he winked at Maz standing off in the shadows. “We have found a suitable base outside of the First Order's clutches on the Outer Rim world of Dantooine. The Resistance will be jumping to hyperspace for the Riaoballo sector in twelve hours. From Dantooine, we will begin to coordinate with our allies around the galaxy. The First Order is strong, impenetrable even, but we all know the one major flaw of any tyrannical military faction – too much power lies with only one person. As Leia said, 'cut the head off the dragon, and chaos ensues.'"

“The head of their war dragon is Kylo Ren. While our allies coordinate their forces, we will organize an ambush of Ren.”

Rey’s pulse quickened as nausea twisted through her stomach; she knew this was coming eventually, but the reality of it was more devastating than she could have imagined. Hours earlier Rey had brought mother and son together one last time with hope that he would come home. They had been so close. Leia's bed was still warm, and Poe was already taking action to assassinate her son.

“We will draw him into a trap with the enticement of a rematch with our Jedi Warrior Rey. Ren's pride will lead to his ultimate downfall. We will ambush him, and the mighty Kylo Ren will fall.”
Once we take out Ren, we will inspire further allied interest. Before they can recover, we will quickly launch an offensive strike on their fleet around the galaxy. We will burn down the entire First Order in one allied battle. This is our moment. We will never give in! We will never surrender! Let’s bring them a war! Do it for Leia!"

Cheers erupted again, but Rey was silent. Poe stared through the crowd of people directly into her eyes. She knew why. He had just entrusted the fate of the Resistance to her. She could save them all, but she would have to lead Kylo to his death to do it.

The room was closing in, too many voices at once overwhelming her senses; her breath was stolen by the indistinguishable figures crowding around her. She desperately searched for an exit, but lightheadedness overcame her, and her surroundings began to tilt and spiral nauseatingly. A familiar face, etched with concern, appeared before her as darkness invaded her vision.
Chapter End Notes

Threat of violence

Poe talks about assassinating Kylo in a speech
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It was finally over. He should have gathered the Force and stood to fight until she put him out of his misery, but he had believed she would have the decency to kill him. When the ground had opened up to swallow him whole, he could have given chase or tried to save himself, but he had been bested by someone better than him; it seemed a suitable death. Watching the same stars he had studied as a kid was almost peaceful, so he laid back in the snow and surrendered to his fate.
He was alone. He was always alone. Though the weak part of him wished she would stay... to end it, to just be there, staring at him with those fierce eyes. But she was gone. At least it was quiet. The snow seeped into his wounds, shivering through him. The pain anchored him to consciousness, but the cold numbed him. The pain faded and a warmth enveloped him as his mind slowed. It was a good enough death. He closed his eyes and waited for his fate, either by blood loss, hypothermia, or planetary collapse, whatever happened first. But his eyes opened to a harsh nudge to his rib cage. As his vision cleared, he figured he was in Hell. And, in a way, he was.

Kylo blinked languidly in a daze as he stared up at his general. He studied the upside-down figure. It was a disappointing sight to see Hux standing over him as he bled out in the snow. “Look at you, Supreme Leader. Living up to your full potential, I see.” Supreme Leader? An antagonistic beep from a droid next to him fractured through his spiraling thoughts as he lay adrift in a sea of devastation. This wasn’t Starkiller. He wasn’t lying in snow, wounded in every way he could be. Hux hadn’t arrived on Snoke’s orders, following his tracking beacon to where he lay defeated. Snoke was dead. Snoke wasn’t even Snoke. Kylo was lying on a training room floor, on the Finalizer. His mother was dead. Perhaps Hux should have left him there on Starkiller, or taken him out of his misery. Perhaps Hux should consider it now. Kylo had awoken to a warning in the Force as he lay unconscious after the destruction of the Supremacy. He knew Hux wanted to kill him. That was why he had brought Hux along with him to Crait in the first place, to keep an eye on the traitor, lest he find a bolt through his back before he had the chance at revenge. But perhaps he should allow Hux the opportunity, because Kylo truly felt... nothing. Whatever he had suffered through before, it was inconsequential compared to the hollow ache that consumed him. He was startled when his general spoke again. “Where are your shackles?”

“If you wish to detain me, you will need Force-suppressing restraints,” his voice said, but he didn't remember forming the thought. He didn't think he was capable of articulating coherent words. He had shattered into pieces, like a smashed mirror, and the man he had been was gone forever – broken beyond repair. Hux could drag him to detainment for all he cared; he wouldn't fight it.

“What...happened last night?” The general pressed. There was concern in the red-headed man's tone. He easily contended with Kylo’s volatility, but this... it terrified him. If Hux had better judgment, he would kill him where he lay. Kylo posed no threat, had no strength to defend himself. And he didn't care; he wouldn't try to stop him.

“I lost everything,” he answered. Hux rolled his eyes, clearly accustomed to his propensity for melodramatic gestures. But it was true. Rey was gone; she tried to kill him, then used their bond to set him up. He caused his own mother's death. Nothing mattered. Hux made no move to usurp him, however. Perhaps his death would not be sporting enough for him like that. Why else would he keep him around after his outburst in the reception hall?
“Did Snoke know you could create fire with your mind wizardry?” It was almost as if Hux was attempting to antagonize him, light the fuse that would make them at odds again, drag them back into familiar territory. But the anger that fed Kylo's darkness was gone.

“New development.”

“I know this means little to you, but you put the lives of everyone on this destroyer at risk,” the general continued spitefully. “You nearly forced me to kill you.”

“You should have.” Kylo would have if the roles had been reversed. Hux would have likely been obligated to as well if Rey hadn't severed his connection to consciousness through the bond.

Why didn't she let him kill me? It would have saved her the trouble of doing it herself.

“I would have, had it not been a risk for mutiny. The Order wouldn't look upon my leadership too respectfully if I was the one to have you killed. But I'll keep that in mind for next time,” Hux sighed derisively as if he were speaking to a petulant child. “Get up.”

“Just leave me.” Kylo closed his eyes, attempting to shut the universe out. But all he could see was his mother's face as she looked upon him for the first time in years. She didn't hate him, she still loved him, she held him as if she truly wanted her son back. It was more devastating than if she had stared at him like he was the monster she always feared he would become.

“What happened to Snoke's high-esteemed Jedi Killer, heir apparent to Darth Vader himself?”

Against all better judgment, he answered his general honestly. No equivocating, no counter-questioning, no snide comments – just the truth. “My mother…” Kylo choked out, prying his eyes open so he wouldn't have to see her face in the darkness behind his eyelids. His thoughts returned to the night on Starkiller, the last time he been the reason for a parent's death, the last time Rey had nearly succeeded in killing him. He was as weak and vulnerable as he had been then, blinking in disorientation as the general stared down at him with that expression on his face – the one that looked like he smelled something repulsive.

Come to think of it, he realized. I'm positive he always looks like that.

Hux's expression reminded him of that night he lay bleeding out in the snow, so did his –
surprisingly—nearly merciful behavior. For the second time that the general had found him on his back, he pulled the fallen Knight to a stand. Though this time, instead of letting his Stormtroopers carry the larger man's weight, Hux supported him with one gloved hand wrapped tightly around his upper arm, and the other controlling him by the wrist. He could not stand unassisted—they both knew it—but Hux established the least amount of contact between them as necessary.

Kylo was grateful for that—he would never have put his arm around the general's shoulder, leaning his weight on him, and Hux would most assuredly never allowed that, either. Kylo did appreciate the purposefully aggressive grip on his arm, as insubordinate as it might be, if only for the pain that helped maintain his grasp on lucidity.

“Straighten yourself up,” Hux sneered quietly. “You are the Supreme Leader. Your weakness reflects weakness upon the Order.”

Hux marched next to Kylo with his eyes forward and head held high, gripping him as inconspicuously as possible as they made their way down the corridor. The general wisely chose the least traveled corridors back to Kylo's chambers, but whenever another soul crossed their path, he was quick to bark “kneel to the Supreme Leader,” or if they noticed his grip on his arm, “prepare the infirmary.” They still hated each other, there was no doubt about that, but Kylo respected Hux's dedication to the appearances of the First Order—even if that meant assisting the man he desired to usurp. He had no further need to make Kylo look weak; the Supreme Leader did enough of that on his own.

Hux marched Kylo into his quarters, past the destruction of the receiving hall and antechambers, and into his private chambers. The general glared in disgust at the deformed helmet of Darth Vader, reposed reverently atop an altar of ashes in his meditation chamber, but otherwise kept his comments to himself. There was a level of terror that trickled down his spine as he noticed the small, black datacard sitting on his desk. If Hux saw it... Kylo would have typically reacted violently to Hux stepping into his private chambers, but he kept his eyes down in an effort not to draw attention to it. He did not offer as much as a snide remark as they stood before his bed. Without preamble, Hux released his grip on Kylo's arm and allowed him to collapse upon the pristine sheets.

“Stay here until you are mildly capable of functioning as Supreme Leader again,” Hux said flatly, gesticulating with his hand. “Or at least whatever it was that you were doing before.”

“Why?”

Why help me?
“The First Order is only as strong as its weakest member,” the general sighed as he adjusted his gloves and straightened his uniform. “And that currently is you – our assumed leader, no less. I will not have the Order fall to chaos or mutiny because of your instability. You are a liability, Ren. You need to consider the consequences of this downward spiral you are dead set on dragging us down into with you.” Kylo nodded in conceded gratitude, aware of how pathetic he must appear to his greatest adversary, but thankful that Hux had chosen to handle it as privately as possible for the good of the First Order. Had Kylo been in the general's position, he would have likely been more ruthless. He would never have expected anything less of his subordinate, either.

“I remember when my mother was killed by the New Republic,” Hux added with an impromptu hastiness. It was the closest statement between them resembling what either would consider sentiment. Without waiting for a response, he switched the Master Comms off and disarmed Kylo of his lightsaber, placing it on a shelf near the bed. “Don't make me regret 'forgetting' that here, Ren,” he said, gesturing toward the lightsaber, before turning on his heels and leaving Kylo alone in his chambers.

In the moment before he left, Kylo considered provoking an argument, if only to have his presence in the room with him for a few moments longer. He waited for his emotions to spiral out of control, but he was too exhausted, closing his eyes to the tears he had bottled up for so long before they could chase the misery down his cheeks.
Chapter End Notes

Brief suicidal thoughts

Brief recount of former injuries
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See the end of the chapter for more notes
“Rey?”

She opened her eyes to Rose and Finn's faces huddling over her, their eyes wide with worry. Strong arms were wrapped around her, making her feel safe, and she realized that Finn was carrying her.
“What happened?” she asked drowsily.

“You fainted,” Rose explained, placing her hand on Rey's forehead in a gesture unfamiliar to her.

“Are you feeling okay?” A skim of her mind revealed she had been attempting to measure her temperature, something Rose had surely learned from her parents. It was something Rey had never experienced before. Rey felt a warmth, a deep attachment, to the woman who had shown her more tenderness and concern than her own family.

Her mind wandered to the other woman who had been the only mother figure she had ever known; the woman who had disappeared before her eyes as Rey begged her to help her find a way to save her son – the same man that her friends were preparing to assassinate. She could feel both sides pulling at the strings of her heart, unraveling her. Either she committed treason for a man who had shut her out, or she lured that broken man to his death. Tears bloomed in her eyes as the reality of it twisted in her chest. She didn’t want this.

Her friends read the emotions that were clear on her face, but they didn’t pry. Perhaps they already knew, but they stayed by her side. She loved them more for it. Finn gripped her tighter and Rose grasped her hand. “We love you, Rey,” Finn murmured, “We're here for you.”

She didn’t have the strength to lie anymore. “I can't do it,” her voice trembled with fear and sorrow, “I can't fight Ben.” Finn set her down gently, grasping her by the shoulders as he stared into her eyes.

His eyes scanned hers, but there was a scrutiny to it. He was searching for an understanding or an answer she hoped he would not find there. “You can fight Ren,” Finn assured her. “You are the strongest person I know –”

“She didn’t say ‘Ren,’ though; did you, Rey?” a voice interrupted.

Poe.

The new general of the Resistance.

He was the last person she wanted to see after what he had tasked her to do. She still feared his intentions after their confrontation at the base. She knew he suspected the truth. Their enemy’s given name on her lips was the last word she wanted him to hear. “Poe, I didn't...”
He raised his hand to silence her explanation. “Ren...Ben... whatever name you choose to call him doesn't matter. Don't worry, you don't have to kill him. You don't even have to fight him,” Poe continued. “All you have to do is draw him in close enough for the rest of us to avenge his mother and the rest of the galaxy.”

“This is not what Leia would have wanted!”

The words were reactive, originating from somewhere deep inside her that rational thought couldn’t silence. It was the most foolish thing she could have said to him, other than admit the truth, but she only recognized that after she had said it.

“I know what Leia wanted,” Poe's voice was low in warning. “That’s why she entrusted the Resistance to me. Leia wanted to save the galaxy by whatever means necessary. Yes, she still had hope for him – a hope she has clearly passed down to you. I don't fault a loving mother for wanting her son back, but you need to understand; she was grieving a boy who died a long time ago. Ben Solo was the first casualty of Kylo Ren, and we will be added to the list if we don't eliminate him first. Leia is not here anymore. And I know the only hope for that monster is a hole through the chest. We all learned that after he killed Han Solo; why didn’t you?”

Rey couldn’t tell him the truth, couldn’t explain the bond that had allowed her to her know him. She doubted he would even if he did know. Her frustration at being caught in the middle boiled over. “I won't be part of this!”

“Yes, you will!” he retorted, his own anger building to match hers. “Of your own free will or as a prisoner of the Resistance.”

“Poe, that's not...” Finn began, but Rey was already pushing past them in tears to flee from the new general's presence. Finn was intent on going after her – to talk some sense into her – but hesitated when he noticed the look of horror widening on Rose's features.

“Finn, I need to talk to you. now,” she rasped.
Chapter End Notes

Vague threats
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See the end of the chapter for more notes.
As Hux stepped out of the Supreme Leader's quarters, he came face to face with a squad of stormtroopers.

“Are you lost?” he barked in irritation.

“No, sir,” the commanding trooper said, clearing his throat. “We were ordered to debrief directly with the Supreme Leader.”

Hux's brows pinched in suspicion. “By whom?”

“The Supreme Leader, sir.”

A myriad of expressions crossed Hux's face before he regained his composure, each more formidable than the last. There was something the Supreme Leader was concealing from him, and this was the key to it all, he was certain. “What was your mission?”

“Outer rim reconnaissance, sir,” the trooper obediently supplied.

A calculating smile twitched on Hux's lips. He knew what Ren was hiding. “What sector?”

“Seitia sector, sir.”

“Data report?” One of the other troopers stepped forward and silently handed him the datapad. He swiftly scanned the report, searching for what he expected to be there. Oddly, there was no mention of the squad encountering anyone. There was only a single anomaly. “The mission suffered casualties?”

“Yes, sir,” the trooper said hesitantly. “Three personnel.”
Despite the normality of the report, there was something he couldn’t place that further drew Hux's suspicion. For the loss of three troopers, the detail was sparse. “Proceed... mission specifics.”

“We landed on-world. It was routine. We encountered no sentients, no sign of the Resistance, and the base was destroyed. Three of our men were killed when we were attacked by a pack of wild beasts,” the trooper said mechanically.

“Right...” Hux drawled. The general had faced enough beasts in his day. Ten qualified troopers should have been capable of neutralizing a terrestrial threat with the weaponry they were allotted.

“Were your thermal scanners or weaponry faulty?” he continued probing, following his intuition. “What species were the wild beasts? What were the fatal injuries to the three troopers? Why did the Supreme Leader ask to be debriefed on the particulars of this mission?”

“We landed on-world. It was routine. We encountered no sentients, no sign of the Resistance, and the base was destroyed. Three of our men were killed when we were attacked by a pack of wild beasts,” the trooper repeated.

Hux's eyes were alight with realization. “Excuse me?”

“We landed on-world. It was routine. We encountered no sen–”

“No! That's quite enough,” he smiled, a wicked, cruel thing. “Which planet?”

“Barkhesh, sir.”

“Dismissed,” he said to the troopers, marching back toward the bridge. They had confirmed two things – where the Resistance was hiding and who was protecting them.

“You thought you could fool me with a mind trick? Well, I found you, Jedi,” Hux scoffed to himself. “And your Supreme Leader boyfriend can’t save you this time.”
As he felt the pieces falling exactly where he wanted them, he raised the bridge on his comlink. “Captain Peavey, plot a course to Barkhesh – grid coordinates K nineteen in the Seitia Sector of the Outer Rim.”

“It was absurd. When Hux had left the bridge, they had not been on course to Barkhesh. He had left to find the Supreme Leader, who was crumpled on the training room floor like the weak man-child that he was, and he promptly returned him to his chambers. What had happened since he left? “On whose orders,” the general snapped. “I just left the Command Bridge minutes ago.”

“Supreme Leader Ren, sir.”

Impossible. There was something else at work, something the general didn’t understand, because Kylo Ren couldn’t have contacted the bridge after he left, Hux had turned the Master Comms off himself. Even if he had, Kylo hadn’t spoken to troopers yet. How did he know to change course?

It cemented the fact in his mind – Kylo Ren was a traitor and had outlived his usefulness to the First Order.
Chapter End Notes

Mention of death
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Rey stumbled down the halls in a daze. The walls appeared to slowly narrow around her, bearing down upon her like the destiny that was all too near. The thought of betraying him again stole the breath from her chest. No matter what Poe said, this was not what Leia would have wanted. How could they do that to his mother on the day she died? How could they ask Rey to take part in a betrayal of that woman? Not just take part – they would use her as bait to kill him.

That was not the Resistance she thought she knew. That was not the Resistance she was fighting for. Rey was fighting to end the war, not to exact revenge. Revenge was the dark side; isn’t that what the Jedi taught? How could she reconcile such a divergence to her moral compass? It was no different to her than when Kylo asked her to join him to rule the galaxy. Rey knew what she had to do.

_I have to find him. He needs to know, even if it's so he can stay far away from me._

“Ben where are you?” she begged.

As Rey entered her room, she could feel the Force change around her. Instead of entering her underground room in the ancient temple, she walked into a dark and elaborate compartment of rooms. If she hadn’t known any better, she would never have guessed it was meant to be lived in. It was dark and cold, and the uniform lights were harsh. The design was sharp and conservative. There were no open viewports, there were no decorations, only smooth black surfaces of varying material. She knew it was on a large cruiser or destroyer, most likely the _Finalizer_. The front room had been destroyed. Plasma had rendered the ornate furniture of the room unrecognizable. Though she had not surveyed her surroundings in the fiery maelstrom, Rey realized that the room must be the location of the confrontation that had happened the night prior when his general had nearly killed him – the same night she had nearly killed him.

She sensed his energy; he was somewhere in one of those rooms. As she explored deeper into the quarters, she noticed that – although the front room was more pretentiously built with daunting architecture and large, heavy furniture – the other rooms were more simple and modest, at least for the Supreme Leader. There was not a single piece of furniture or object that was not a necessity. There were few personal items, which struck her as odd. It was as if no one actually lived there. It was sterile and sparing, stark and uninviting. Her shelter in her AT-AT had felt more like a home than this. No, this... this was a prison. Nothing was out of place, save for a broken mirror, the pieces meticulously gathered and stacked in a neat pile. She walked through the door of the
antechamber, and there it was.

His sleeping chamber.

As she gathered the nerve to walk through the doors, she noticed marks in a wall off to her left. No, not marks, scratches. She had seen those same scratches before - on a wall in her AT-At on Jakku. There weren't as many on this wall as hers, but it was unmistakably intentional. She had been counting the days until she was reunited with her family; what had he been counting?

Those thoughts were abandoned the moment the door slid open, because she was jolted with the anguish he felt. He was lying on his side on the bed, in much the same way he had been the night before. *When I betrayed him.*

Would he even want to see her?

The black, shiny blankets were undisturbed underneath him. Kylo's eyes were red and swollen. His chest was bare, and his strong arms were wrapped around himself as if he was all he had to hold onto. She supposed it had probably been years since he had been lovingly embraced. Their brief touches through the bond and when his father caressed his cheek with his dying breath on Starkiller, could have been the only intimate human contact he had in nearly a decade. She remembered those lonely nights on Jakku, curled up on herself as he was now, and it struck her how their remarkably different circumstances had shaped them to be so unbelievably similar.

There was a difference, however. She craved touched, she sought it out, but he feared it. When she witnessed the moment their hands touched in his memories, he anticipated pain. Not only had Kylo gone without touch for years, he had become so accustomed to pain that he didn't know what it felt like to be touched without it. If pain had become the only language he understood, could she break through to him? Or would he run from any tenderness she showed him? After what she had done, he would likely hate it either way.

With that in mind, she cautiously approached him, preparing herself for his rejection of her presence. For the many reactions she had anticipated, however, she hadn't expected no reaction at all. As she moved closer, there wasn't a single flicker of reaction in his eyes. It was almost as if he was staring right through her. Could he see her? She knew he could sense her in the Force. Whether or not he could see her physical presence, she could see him. She would be there for him, because he needed someone. Even though he was the one person in the galaxy she should avoid, she was the only person in the galaxy who could be there for him.

She chose to stay.

Kylo finally dragged his gaze to her face and studied her, searching for her intent. She sensed the raw, exposed edge of vulnerability that threatened to ignite at any moment. Closing his eyes, he sighed in exhaustion. His thoughts echoed in her mind.
Kill me or leave me; I can’t do this tonight.

“I don’t want to leave you,” she whispered. “Do you want me to leave?”

He didn’t answer. His eyes remained closed, his energy distant. It was as if he was not even registering that she was speaking.

“Ben... please look at me...”

“Ben...”

“Kylo...” His eyes flickered up to hers. She glared at him in annoyance that he forced her to use his chosen name. “Tell me that we are alone, and I’ll leave.”

She could feel the weight of the choice she was asking him to make as it settled between them. After everything that had happened, she steeled her heart, but hope bloomed there as his eyes warmed with a spark of life. His throat bobbed with emotion and he shook his head, refusing to give truth to those words.

Rey was distracted when a blur of beeping fury slammed into her legs. Blue was angry at her – as he should have been – that she almost hurt Kylo. He blamed her for his master’s sorrow. “Blue, I’m sorry!” she tried. “I promise, I don’t want to hurt him!” The droid was nothing but persistent, shoving her away from his master.

“It’s okay, Blue,” Kylo rasped. “She can stay.” Blue rolled to the corner, still grumbling in disapproval. Rey walked to the edge of the bed. He stared up at her through his lashes, making no move to sit up or protect himself from her. “You can stay.”

Lowering herself to sit on the bed next to him, she watched his eyes carefully for a hint of protest. There was sorrow and confusion, and something else that looked a lot like hope, but no animosity. With a deep, emboldening breath, she made her decision.

Rey gently climbed into the bed next to him, facing him. His eyes widened – guarded and uncertain – but full of wonder. These were not the eyes of the leader of a radical military junta, but
those of a wayward, broken boy. Without a word, she pried his arms away from where they were wrapped around his chest. He let her, brows furrowed, confusion twisting across his face. He inhaled sharply, his muscles tensing instinctively as she slid down next to him, her head tucked against his chest.

Kylo shuddered as she wrapped her arms around his broad back. She swallowed her gasp as her fingers settled on a latticework of scarred ridges underneath his smooth skin. She had seen his back, there were no noticeable scars – only a sprinkling of moles – but below the surface... it was extensive. It was as if he had only placed Bacta patches on long enough to heal the skin, but not the wounds underneath. Instead of shying away, she splayed her hands to cover as many of the wounds as she could and squeezed him tightly.

After a moment, his body relaxed into her embrace. His disciplined muscles rippled under her fingertips, reminding her that he had the capability to hurt her, but that wasn’t why she was afraid. Rey waited for him to shove her away, to tell her he never wanted to see her again, to abandon her. His chest shuttered against her as he breathed, his pounding heartbeat vibrating against her cheek, reminding her that he was just as terrified as she was. He slowly and tentatively wrapped his large arms around her, sighing into the comfort of her touch. It was as if she were actually there in his bed holding him, not across the galaxy.

The grief left no energy for mental barriers. Touching him, she could feel every raw emotion that twisted through him as her own emotions flowed uninhibited from her. The bond was completely open. It simultaneously tore her apart and mended her back together again, soothing the aching hollowness that plagued her.

Every emotion coalesced between them, flooding the bond. They were drowning in a sea of grief, with only each other to hold onto. He wrapped his arms tighter around her, and then his body began to shake – imperceptibly at first, but it built in severity. There was not a word in any language Rey had learned that could explain the sounds that were wrenched from deep within him. The heartbreaking sound fractured her own resolve.

As if a dam had finally broken inside him, rasping sobs wracked his body, muffled by her hair. She let go of the last strength she had held onto for the sake of everyone around her and let her own body convulse as she wept against him. Her hot tears rolled down his chest, his dampened her hair. Neither said a word...neither needed to. They clung to each other desperately as the sea of grief washed over them.
Chapter End Notes

Grief

Two characters share in the experience of grief
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Finn stumbled down the steps of the temple in search of his fiancée in the shadows cast by the Barkhesh skies. The briefing with the new general had taken longer than he had anticipated, but he knew that Rose was not one for dramatics. Whatever she needed to tell him was urgent, and likely of dire consequence. He found Rose pacing at the bottom of the steps.

When she turned to him, his heart dropped. Her eyes were brimming with pity and remorse. Whatever it was, it was worse than he thought.
“What's wrong?” he stammered, wrapping her in a fearful embrace. “Is everything okay?”

Rose hesitated, before pulling herself from the comfort of Finn's arms. She wouldn't look at him when she said, “I think you need to sit down.”

Finn chuckled humorlessly. “Rose, you’re scaring me. Is it about us?”

Rose shook her head, but he found no relief in it. There was a dread growing in his gut that was almost… instinctual. Whatever she said next would hurt him, he was certain. “It's about Rey.”

Terror hitched his breath. A thousand terrible possibilities flooded his mind as he contemplated his greatest fears coming to fruition. “What do you mean?” he grasped her shoulders to better study her eyes as he bent down to her level. “What happened?”

“It was something Poe said.” Her words were low, almost mumbled, as if she wished she didn’t have to say them. “He said Rey had to kill Kylo Ren to “avenge his mother.”

It should have been a relief, that they were only talking about a conversation. The dread wouldn’t fade, however. Finn wasn’t following her line of thinking, why did it matter that Poe was talking about Kylo and Leia? What did that have to do with Rey? He looked at her expectantly. She bit her lip as she finally met his eyes. “Kylo Ren is…?”

“Leia’s son,” he supplied, confusion still wrinkling his forehead. It never occurred to him that someone wouldn’t know their relation, especially after what Kylo did to Han on Starkiller.

Rose sucked in a breath apprehensively, wiping her sweaty palms on her jacket. Finn was trying – trying to be patient, trying to understand what Kylo’s genetics had to do with Rey, trying not to scream as his unease escalated, but he just wanted her to get to the point. His fingers tightened insignificantly on her shoulders as he fought his frustration, but it was enough for her to notice and force herself to continue. “And his real name is?”

It was easier for Finn when he only knew him as Kylo Ren – Jedi Killer. Before he saw his face, he imagined a monster found only in nightmares. To learn his name, his history, see his face, meet Han and Leia, and then witness what he did to them, was far worse. He hated hearing that name, hated saying it even more. “Ben Solo.” He spat the name as if it were poison, his lips curled into a sneer.
Rose nodded, sighing in acceptance of the truth she had feared. Nothing prepared him for her next words. “Do you remember when Rey told me about the man she has feelings for?”

“Yes...” The confusion was fading to a grim realization. This involved Rey and Kylo Ren, and that fed the fear inside him. He wanted to go back to the moment when Rey didn’t want to kill him because she thought she saw ‘light’ in him, not because...

Sympathetic pain swelled in her eyes as she witnessed the understanding in his. It only confirmed his fear of what she would say next. He refused to look at her when she said it. “Do you remember when you asked me if that man was Kylo Ren?”

“I don't like where this is going, Rose,” he said, voice tight with emotion. Finn rocked on his feet, refusing to meet her eyes even though he could feel her studying him. He wanted to run, so he wouldn’t face the truth he knew he'd see if he looked at her. But he couldn't run, because she needed him, and Rey needed him. Especially if what Rose was insinuating was true. He knew she was waiting for him, so he forced himself to raise his eyes.

“Finn, I swear I didn't know,” she whispered.

“Please, no,” he begged as tears blurred his vision. He was pleading with her as much as he was the universe. He shook his head in denial, refusing to believe his best friend was capable of caring for a monster. “No, you're wrong. She wouldn't...” His voice broke under the weight of the truth.

“No, Finn, I'm not wrong,” she replied, not unkindly. “Rey told me she has feelings for a man she’d been meeting in secret through the Force. She said he was Leia's son, Ben Solo, but he’d had a ‘falling out’ with his family and she was trying to convince him to come home.” She paused and there was something terrifying in her eyes. Whatever it was, she didn’t voice it. “There’s more I need to tell you, but now is not the time. We need to focus on Rey and what this means. I swear, I only found out tonight that he goes by something else now. I had no idea Ben Solo is Kylo Ren.” If Finn had considered his reaction before that moment – when his entire galaxy was turned upside down – he would have imagined screaming, throwing something in anger, perhaps a panic attack.

But he just closed his eyes and exhaled slowly.

There was only one question that plagued his thoughts, and it wasn’t for the woman standing before him. “Why, Rey?”
“I thought Ben was at risk of being killed by Kylo Ren, like his dad,” Rose continued. “I never imagined he was him. You told me they have a connection through the Force. I should have realized after the battle with the First Order recon ship, she had information that I knew she shouldn't have had,” she paused for a moment, tilting her head to stare up at the sky before continuing. “This puts everyone in the Resistance at risk, whether she has willingly provided him information or not. Finn, keeping this secret, this is...”

Finn shut his eyes as he nodded in agreement. “Treason. I know. Have you told anyone?” he asked in a strained rasp.

“No.”

“Don't, please.” Finn knew he had no right to ask. Every moment the others were unaware of the threat in their midst was another moment their lives hung in the balance. Kylo Ren could use Rey to find their location, or maybe he didn’t even need it, maybe he could find them through the bond and kill them while they slept. If they didn’t tell the Resistance about what they found immediately, then they would be complicit in treason.

If it had been anyone else, he would have already found Poe in the war room. But Rey was his best friend; he had to give her one more chance. He remembered her distress over the Borgle bat in the forest, her sympathy for broken creatures. Finn was sure Kylo was manipulating her, convincing her he wasn’t a monster, just as he had done to his father. But Finn knew just how dangerous Kylo Ren was. He wouldn’t let their enemy do to Rey what he had almost done to him.

“Finn,” Rose warned. “if we don't tell Poe, then we are as guilty as she is.”

“This ends tonight, you have my word.” His voice was cold in a way he had never heard himself before. Murderous. Rose’s eyes grew wide in fear. “Where is she?”

“I... I don't know.” she stammered. “What do we do?”

“Give me some time with her. Go pack for Dantooine,” he straightened to his full height, his thoughts focused with fierce resolution. Kylo Ren would die before they left Barkhesh, he just needed to think of the best way to confront her. “I need to go for a walk. Alone. Then I'll find her and kill him myself if I have to.”
Communication

Chapter Summary

Fun fact - Kylo's monologue about order and instability (though paraphrased) is a cannon monologue from The Force Awakens novel. His recitation of Leia's monologue about monsters is also a real monologue made by Leia from a comic Star Wars Annual #2.

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Rey sighed deeply into the warmth of Kylo’s arms, drifting in the comforting lull of their bond, waiting for the Force to inevitably separate them. At some point, he had turned from his side onto his back. His arm held her tightly against his side as he stared up at the ceiling, lost in thought. It seemed like an eternity before either of them said anything. Rey wondered if they lay there long enough if the entire galaxy around them would disappear.

No Jedi, no Sith, no Resistance, no First Order, no war – just Ben and Rey, together, safe in our bond.
She lifted herself onto her elbow to study him; her hand was on his chest to support her weight. His dark, burning eyes were filled with pain and longing, and for the first time since they were bonded, she knew why. She had been on the other side; she had seen his life through those eyes. She told him she had understood him in the hut, but she realized now, she hadn’t understood him at all. Had he ever truly understood her? He thought he did.

But so had she. She had known what his uncle had done and knew it contributed to his fall. It was simpler when there was someone to blame, when one choice could have prevented it all. But from the moment he was born, he lived in the shadow of a man he could neither become nor escape. His entire life had been a series of events that culminated in his fall. How could she fix that? How could she help him before it was too late?

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Kylo asked, breaking the heavy silence. His stare was still fixed on the ceiling.

“I was wondering how many times a boy can be called a monster before he believes it,” Rey said softly, tentatively allowing her hand to follow the ridge of his collarbone, wondering if he would push her away. The ache was heavy in her heart. She had witnessed the loss of his mother, she couldn’t stand imagining the moment he shut her out again.

I don’t want to lose you.

“I am a monster.” His voice was tight, and even if she didn’t have the bond, she would have heard the truth of it. The bond was open, however, and not only did she hear it, but she felt it all. There was an agony inside him she could feel squeezing her own chest. “I killed my mother.”

“Ben, that’s not your burden to bear,” she whispered, her hand settling over his pounding heart. “She knew she was dying; she just wanted to see you one last time, and she did. She said what she needed to say.”

“Did she suffer?” he choked.

I wish you could have been there. I wish you could have shared her last moments with her. Maybe you would have seen how loved you are.

The idea settled over her like a warm beam of sunlight bursting through the clouds. She grabbed his wrist and brought his hand up to her temple.
“You can see, Ben... if you want to.” His eyes widened with the understanding of exactly what she was offering him. She knew his father’s dying face haunted him, but she trusted that witnessing Leia’s death would be different. He nodded hesitantly, his heart conflicted. He blinked back tears, and his lips trembled in anticipation.

Rey closed her eyes and thought back to that moment at Leia’s bedside after he had shut her out again. She felt his consciousness accessing her memory. It was agonizing for her to relive, but she suffered through it for him... and Leia. It was how he had felt, after all, when she forced him to relive his most painful memories. It was worth it to give him closure, something she feared she would never have in her own parents’ deaths. At least she hoped it would give him closure, his emotions were… tumultuous. His sharpest reaction was to his mother’s last words.

I love my son, Leia said in her final moments, and I still believe he has light left in him. But if losing Ben to darkness was the key to saving this galaxy, then I would choose that over watching my Jedi son die with the Resistance at the hands of another empire. So would Han. Maybe that was why the Force chose us to be his parents.

Rey feared what those words would do to him. Had she been wrong to show him? Would Leia’s last words only serve to push him further away? Something happened, however, as her energy dissipated into the Force. The bond was overflowing with sorrow and regret, but also gratitude, peace, and love. The heaviness of his presence in her mind seemed less burdened.

As the memory faded when his cloak dropped onto the empty bed, another memory emerged. Rey wasn’t certain whether it was her doing or his. The memory was a moment she had thought about endlessly in the past few weeks, she knew every detail by heart.

Kylo reached across the galaxy to touch his fingertips to hers over the fire in that little hut on Ahch-To. A spark of energy passed between them, and for a brief moment, she was transported away from his sympathetic eyes. There were only brief snippets of a future, but the emotions were clear. She knew then the feelings she felt for this man were not meant for an enemy. The first flash was sand… then snow… a lake… then trees… his open palm, bare and outstretched… him standing beside Finn and Poe, weapon raised… her head on his shoulder… lightning… him standing to face Snoke… his carefree smile… ink written carefully on paper… deft fingers switching the falcon’s controls… a boy’s laugh… a pair of dice exchanging hands… a twin sunrise… an indigo hued kiss… his eyes bright with love, purpose and hope… and a blue, crossguard lightsaber. The emotions of the brief flashes were bright and hopeful. She had believed then that they would never have to be alone again.

She had been wrong.
There was nothing clear that was proof he would turn, or when, it was only a future that inspired hope. It validated the feelings that she had been developing for him, convincing her that if she went to him, he would turn. For her. It convinced her there was a future where they could be together. It had not turned out the way she had hoped.

The memory continued in her mind. The vision faded as Luke entered, shouting. Her fight with Luke in the rain played out in front of them. She wondered why he cared to witness it. Kylo knew she left Luke behind on Ahch-To. He fixated on their fight, of course, but also the moment she said, *then he's our last hope.* His hand was shaking uncontrollably against her, his response to the mere sight of Luke still visceral, but he did not sever the connection until it was over.

Rey opened her eyes, but his were still shut. Tear streaks stained his cheeks. He was quiet for a long time, minutes ticking by like hours, but she stayed silent. She feared she brought him more pain. The shields around his emotions were high, but she could still sense the hurricane of emotions raging behind them.

“Ben, say something,” she whispered. He finally raised his eyes to meet hers.

“You…” he said finally, “You defended me, you fought him. For me. Why?”

She shook her head, brows pinched in confusion. Why did he care about Luke? She was angry after Luke had interrupted them. She was angry after she discovered what he had done to his own nephew. He wouldn’t help her save the people who needed him. Of course, she fought him. After everything that happened following her confrontation with Luke, she hadn’t considered its relevance to *him.* “Luke didn’t believe in you like I did,” she said. “Like I still do. If I had been at that temple, I would have believed you, I would have defended you.”

His jaw hardened, and he shook his head. His emotions spiked again over the bond. She knew it was a sensitive subject, so she refocused his attention back to the other memories he witnessed. “What about the vision? And your mother?”

The moment she mentioned his mother, something flashed in his eyes. “Don't,” he warned, his voice cracking with emotion. “Not now, I can't...”

She closed her eyes for a moment, breathing deeply to center herself. He had been more open with her than ever before, and she had hoped it was her chance to finally get through to him. She swallowed her disappointment, feeling his barriers slowly close off his side of the bond.
She was losing him.

“Ben, please, don't shut me out,” she begged, striving to convey through her eyes just how significant their open bond had been to her. “Don't leave me alone again, please.”

“Why?” There was a resentful edge to his voice. His stare was fixed above him, and he swallowed apprehensively before continuing. “Why are you here, Rey? What do you want from me? You scream at me, tell me the galaxy is better off without me, use me to save your friends, then try to kill me. All of that I understand. I deserve that. But this...”

I don’t understand this.

His voice faded as they both tried to put to words what exactly had happened between them. Neither had bent to the will of the other. From an outsider's perspective, nothing had changed. But Rey knew after what they had shared through the bond, there was something there that hadn’t been there before.

“Okay, I'm just going to say it,” she said, pressing herself up again so she could study his eyes. “I know there’s nothing I can say to convince you of the truth, but you are worth it for me to try.” There was a flash of confusion in his eyes then. It was as if he could not comprehend being worth anything to anyone.

“I'm sorry, Ben – for everything I did to you. I realized after you shut me out how awful I have been. And I am not excusing the awful things you do, because you have done truly awful, awful things. I mean, awful, and I can say that because I know that’s not who you are. I thought I would never forgive you. And I know you will never forgive yourself. But I want to forgive you, and I'm trying, and I know the person that did those things is not who you are.” As Kylo stared above him, she studied the hard line of his jaw and wondered which part upset him more; that he had done terrible things or that she knew he was better than what he had done.

“All I can ask,” she continued, her voice heavy with the weight of her regret, “is that you try to forgive me, too. I said awful things. I did awful things to you. I betrayed you and became just like everyone else in your life. I didn't realize how much bringing you to your mother would hurt you. I didn't fear the darkness, and I almost lost us both because of it. I don't know what else to say that could make this right... I’m sorry. I know it's just words, but I truly am. I’m sorry if you thought I was using you to save my friends, and maybe I was, but it wasn't my intention. I wanted to save you, Ben – not only for the Resistance, or the galaxy, or your mother, or even me, but for you. Because I...” She let her voice trail off before her words started down the dangerous path of her complicated feelings for him. In her silence, his gaze found hers.
“I believe the Force brought us together because we understand each other in ways no one else can. We were supposed to be the one person the other could trust, and we betrayed that, but it’s not too late learn from our mistakes. I know I am asking too much for your forgiveness. You wouldn’t forgive your family for their betrayal; why would you forgive your enemy? But I would always regret it if I didn't try.” Kylo studied her eyes for a moment, searching for something. Not that he needed to; the truth was waiting in her open side of the bond. When he didn’t ask the question in his eyes, she continued.

“To answer your question – without all the rambling – I came here because I want to be here for you. You don’t have to be alone anymore if you choose not to be. From the moment we touched hands, I knew I didn't want to lose you, Ben. I’ve been so angry because I was disappointed. It tears me apart to have my loyalty to you and my friends pull me in two different directions. But I’d rather suffer that than have you hate me. Every moment I have spent without you in the bond has been the loneliest of my life. I won’t take that for granted again. But I understand if you don’t want me to stay.”

Part of her still couldn’t explain what it was that made her fight for him. If he had been anyone else, she would have walked away long ago. She didn’t know why the Force had chosen to connect them, knowing she would have given up on him as everyone else had, but she wouldn’t give up on him now. She had never felt this way for anyone, never cared to.

It had only ever been him.

As he searched her eyes for the truth, she feared the worst. The damage had been done. She had meant what she said; why would he forgive her when he refused to forgive the people he loved? When he shut her out, she would know she tried. They had weathered the dark hours after Leia’s death together; it would have to be enough.

He chewed his lip before responding. “I want you to stay,” he rasped. With those words, it felt like the weight of the world had fallen away.

His fingers tightened on her back instinctively, and only then did he notice he was touching her. He jolted as if she were made of lightning, and his hands dropped away. His words and his hands were at war, and she didn’t know what to believe. As if responding to her fear, she heard his thoughts pass across her mind like a whisper.

_I could never hate you, and you have nothing to be forgiven for. I don't deserve any of this._
Knowing he believed that released the floodgate to a new set of tears. “I know you, Ben,” she said, holding his stare. “I’ve been inside that deep, chaotic mind of yours. You deserve so much more than the path you’ve lived and the awful things done to you.”

*Please let me in.*

He answered by cautiously lifting his arm in invitation, his eyes wide and hopeful. She slid back into his warm embrace. Her tears pooled on his heated skin as she rested her head on his chest. He didn’t seem to mind as his arm moved to wrap around her, gentle with hesitation. The steady thrum of his heart dried her tears; each beat pumped a renewed promise through her veins, vowing that as long as that heart gave life to him, it gave life to hope.

A calm settled over him, too, settling his raging emotions, when a light – his light – passed between them. As the warmth settled in their connection, his grip tightened around her. His strong arms held her against him, leaving her feeling safe, valued, and wanted. She smiled.

*I know who you are, Ben Solo,* she repeated in her mind. *I feel your light.* She knew he heard it; her mind was completely open to him.

"I don't even know me, Rey," he whispered into her hair, his voice laced with deep emotion. They were both quiet for a moment, pondering the depths of his admission.

*Don’t be afraid, I know who you were, show me who you are.*

She had learned to understand the man who died that night at the temple, or at least, somewhere in the horrors of Snoke’s training. And she knew who he was deep in his soul; a truth he did not have the power to hide. She also knew, however, that there was another side of him, a side that she liked to pretend didn’t exist. Kylo Ren was who that monster wanted him to be. But she would be a fool to believe that there wasn’t a part of him who wanted to rule the galaxy and destroy those that opposed him.

She wanted to know that dangerous, powerful man – her enemy – the man who chose power over her, but the same man who held her as if she was his very life source. She wanted to know the man caught somewhere between Kylo Ren and Ben Solo. She wanted to know everything about him. To do that, she had to push past the assumptions and ask him anything...everything...until he finally understood. Somehow, she knew this time he would answer.
Rey knew this was her chance. There was something like longing in his eyes. From the very beginning, he wanted her to know him. She just had to convince him to trust her when he had every reason not to. She lowered herself down next to him again. She rested her head on his chest so she could fully wrap her arms around him. His pulse beat wildly against her cheek. Holding him tightly, she hoped she showed him that—no matter what—she would stay. "I want to know everything about you, even the bad things. I want to understand, Ben."

It was everything she wanted from the others—understanding—and with the spike of his emotions at that word she knew he felt the same. She could feel the fear, but, underneath, she felt his hope. "Ask me anything," he whispered.

"Anything?"

The deep baritone of his voice resonated against her cheek. "Anything that is mine to tell. I'm done hiding from you, Rey."

She considered his answer for a moment. "My parents…"

His entire torso moved with his sigh. "…is not my story to tell."

"Then at least admit that you lied—you didn’t kill them." He was quiet, though she knew his thoughts were loud. She only wished she was privy to them.

He spoke slowly to control the resentment in his tone, but she felt it through his skin. "I never lied to you."

She had never wanted to be back inside his mind more than that moment. She knew logically he couldn’t have killed them, but everything about his words sounded true. He had never lied to her before; why would he lie to her about something that would make her hate him? If he wouldn’t answer the question that burned in her mind, then she craved to know why; why he would kill them or why he would lie to her, whichever turned out to be the truth.

"Will you lower the barriers in your mind again? I want to know all your thoughts, not just the ones you choose to say." His body tensed underneath her, and her hope dimmed. He may not have said
the words, but his swift withdrawal to his side of the bond made it clear he would not share that openness with her again.

You're not done hiding from me, are you, Ben?

Silence stretched between them in her disappointment and his stonewalling.

“Compromise?” Kylo suggested hesitantly. “I need... I'm not ready to share everything in my head with you. But what if I promise to answer anything and share the thoughts I don’t usually say?”

She smiled and nodded against him in agreement. “Don't blame me if you don't like what you hear,” he added softly.

Where do I start?

She knew it wasn't a moment to waste on questions about childhood hobbies or favorite colors. Though she was quite confident she could guess the color. She didn’t know how long their connection would last – they had already been together longer than they ever had before – and she didn’t know if she would ever have the chance again.

Rey tilted her head to rest on his shoulder so she could examine his expression. “After everything he did to you, why did you stay with Snoke?”

He eyed her in resignation, arching an eyebrow at her bold first question. He chewed his lip in reluctance to answer, but she was pleasantly surprised when he acquiesced. “He was the only person who ever believed in me. Without him... I was nothing. I owed him everything.”

Even after witnessing his memories, knowing that he saw the galaxy differently than she did, Rey wasn’t prepared for an immediate divergence in their beliefs. Not over something she thought was simple to see. She didn’t understand how he could believe those lies. His family made mistakes, but they believed in him. They never gave up on him; though he hadn’t realized it then, certainly he saw that now. Rey believed in him, but Snoke didn't. That was obvious after what the monster did with the bond. Rey tried to hide her frustration with his answer. He had been honest and open; she couldn’t condemn him for an answer she didn’t agree with.

“But he used you. He tortured you.”
“There are more painful ways to torture someone than a little Force lightning,” he answered flippantly, though his expression was solemn, his eyes dark. “It wasn’t torture, it was training. I was used to it. I deserved it.”

Rey closed her eyes and slowed her breathing, forcing her darkness away. It would be so easy to allow the darkness to soothe her, but she would never make that mistake again. She focused on his heartbeat under her fingers until the anger ebbed. Opening her eyes, she only felt empathy and compassion that her bondmate truly believed he deserved to suffer. “Ben, what he did to you – ”

“I don’t want pity, especially not from you,” he warned, his teeth clenched as he tried to temper his anger. “I know the torment you’ve suffered. What you saw in my memories... right or wrong, I chose to join him. What he did to me was necessary, it made me stronger. It was nothing.”

The darkness was growing stronger, becoming more difficult to keep at bay. The images of what he suffered crashed through her mind unbidden, and the fierce protectiveness she had felt over him in his memories returned. “I saw what he did to you. I felt it. Don’t you dare say that was nothing. You begged for death. If he wasn’t dead, I would kill him myself.”

His face softened at her declaration, his eyes still wounded, but appreciative. “I survived.”

“I don’t understand...” she said, her voice still heavy with emotion, but the darkness abated as she stared into the warmth in his eyes. “You were so angry with your parents for lying and abandoning you, at Luke for betraying you, but what Snoke did to you when you joined him was worlds worse.”

He was quiet, but she waited patiently as the moments stretched. No one had questioned him like this before, and she would force him to face it. “Did you ever think that maybe I can't forgive them because they are the reason I turned to Snoke?” his voice was low and strained with the admission. She was breaking through his defenses, layer by layer. “Did you ever think that if I hated him, too, then my whole life would be meaningless? I would have no purpose.”

Her eyes filled with sorrow. “Is having no purpose worse than torture?”

“Yes,” he whispered. “His training made me stronger.”

“No, I felt your powerful light in your memories. Ben was stronger.” She was adamant but not
unkind. There was no doubt in her mind, after fighting as him in his memories, and fighting against him on Starkiller; suppressing the light suppressed his natural strengths.

“Ben was weak,” Kylo scoffed. “He believed the lies of his family. He was too trusting and hopeful. He allowed himself to be betrayed. He nearly fell to his own uncle’s hand.”

“Kylo was weak.” Rey knew she risked him reacting with volatility, but she also knew her only chance to save him was to force him to see the truth. “He believed Snoke’s lies. He remained loyal to his master, allowing himself to be tortured and torn apart until he didn’t know who he was anymore. Snoke was possessive and jealous and cruel, but Kylo didn’t realize how he was being used. Kylo would have fallen to Snoke’s hand, had he not found enough light in himself to kill his master.”

“He gave me a chance at a destiny worth fulfilling.”

_Enough about destiny. What if the destiny everyone has decided for us is wrong? What if you are not supposed to be another Vader? What if I am not supposed to be the Jedi who defeats Kylo Ren?_

Rey was sick of hearing about destiny. What if the destiny the others had decided for them was wrong? What if he was _not_ supposed to be another Vader? What if she was not supposed to deliver the fate of Kylo Ren? How could the Cosmic Force will her to be abandoned by her family, will him to feel betrayed by his, destine them both to a life of suffering – even if part of that suffering was self-imposed – and then bond them together so they could kill each other? Why would the force care about her? She wasn’t a Skywalker; she was a nobody. “Do you even believe in destiny?”

He huffed a humorless chuckle. “Do you?”

“It’s difficult to believe in when the vision of the future I saw on Ahch-To was a lie.” She could feel the tears stinging in her eyes again, the disappointment from the throne room returned. He was supposed to turn, the vision had foretold it, but he refused her.

He hummed.

“Visions in the Force are difficult to read,” he replied, pointedly avoiding addressing what she had seen or what he did. “I do believe that there are no absolutes in life, even prophesies.”
“Does that mean you don't believe visions?” She wasn't sure what she hoped his answer would be. She had believed in destiny when the Force showed her a future of belonging with him, but her latest vision of losing Finn terrified her. She wouldn’t allow it to come true.

“I believe they can show the future,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “But we interpret visions based upon past experiences, and our judgments are biased by those experiences. So the vision could be realized in the future, but not necessarily in the way we interpreted it.”

Do you or don't you?

The ambiguity of his answer was irritating. He reminded her of his uncle. “If you believe that visions show the future, then you must believe in destiny?”

“I’m as conflicted about destiny as I am about everything else,” Kylo said with a humorless huff. “Once I joined Snoke, I believed I was always destined to fall; this path had been fated to me before I was even born. I still believe my destiny is forever linked to my grandfather.”

“But you’re not you’re grandfather.”

Kylo stared up at the ceiling, studying it raptly as if it held answers. “If I did not have Skywalker blood in my veins, do you think my parents would have feared my powers like they did? Do you think Luke would have tried to kill me? Do you think Snoke would have searched for me? No. I know now I am nothing more to them than my grandfather’s legacy. So perhaps I was always going to fall to darkness. And you were always going to find the light because you’re... you.”

What is that supposed to mean? You said I had no place in this, and I was nothing to this story.

“You survived abandonment, starvation, and slavery,” he continued, “and yet you’re forever hopeful. You were always meant to be good, so the inverse is true. ‘Darkness rises and light to meet it’ – we were always going to collide. But after that last vision, there’s a part of me that wants to believe I have a choice, that I am fighting for something. The Force has a will, the Force connected us, and I know the part I play in this was not meant for a happy ending. Since the moment I met you, I knew that you would be the one to deliver my fate. But I have to believe that if there is an ultimate destiny, I can alter what happens before I reach it. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

“I agree, Ben,” she said, hope blooming in her heart that he wanted change. “I believe we can still
make the right choice. You weren’t destined to fall; I felt your light with Dev and Jacen. It was what happened with your uncle, his choice, that led to your fall. So if my destiny truly is to play a part in your fate, then we can change it, right? We can change our destiny by making different choices. So what choice do we make to save you?”

He exhaled slowly. “Only the Force has the answer to that, Rey. The choices we think are right could very well lead to the fate we are trying to prevent. Luke made the choice to kill me for the greater good, to stop me from falling to darkness and prevent this exact destiny from occurring. Instead of changing fate, he ensured it. Or Snoke. He feared my compassion for you long before I admitted it to myself. He feared the sentiment would lead to a betrayal like Vader, so he demanded I kill you. And he fell to the very fate he was trying to prevent. You may think that the only way to save me is for me to defect and join the Resistance. But I warn you, Rey, that choice to save me could very well lead to my death by the First Order or even the Resistance. We will never know what the right choice is. All I do know is that every choice made as the result of a vision is ultimately the wrong one.”

There was an undertone of bitterness when he spoke again. “In our visions, you thought I would turn, I thought you would stand by me. Either the destiny we saw was wrong or the choices we made were. Visions are impossible to read.”

He seemed focused that it had not come to pass as he’d hoped, but she only found more hope in his argument. “Ben, if the visions were real, then you’re right, the choices we made changed them. We changed the future, which means we can do it again.” We can save Finn. “Did you have another vision when I touched your hand?” Her mind recalled to his appearance in that corridor in her vision. Fear in his eyes, but also…hope.

“Yes.”

“No you think it is the future?” Rey’s heart was conflicted. She desired the vision of Kylo to be true, but the body under the blanket... the thought of losing one her best friends, was frightening. Was it a warning? Would someone she loved be lost by his hand? Could he save himself and save her best friend in the process? Or would she be faced with a choice – an impossible choice?

His voice was barely a whisper when he answered. “I saw….” He exhaled with a shudder, trying to force himself to say it. “I saw you fall to darkness, Rey.” Fear trickled through her. She had forced away the darkness since then; surely that had to change something. His eyes finally shifted back to hers in his promise. “If it is real, then I will do everything in my power to stop it from coming true. I won't let you fall, Rey.”

You do regret it.
“You mean, you won’t let me fall like you?” she asked boldly. The tenderness in his eyes hardened. “I meant what I said before; I wish I could have been at the temple, Ben.”

“No.” She didn’t know whether he was arguing with her or reassuring her. Maybe both. “Don’t be naïve, Rey. You would have been disappointed like you were in the throne room when you couldn’t save me. If you were there… it wouldn’t have been any different than Dev or Tionne or Jacen.” The names sounded rusted on his lips. It was quite possible he hadn’t spoken them aloud in years. “You saw what happened to them. You would have fallen too, either by death or to darkness.”

“But Jacen could have helped you! I would have helped you –”

“Perhaps now that you know how it turned out,” he said. “But even if you were at that temple, even if you could have made a difference, you couldn’t have known how it would end. You wouldn’t have known how to help. Just imagine what you would change if you could go back to when we first met? It’s no different. You couldn’t have done anything. You would have been asleep in your hut when my uncle tried to kill me, just like the others. You couldn’t have stopped Cade. You couldn’t have prevented Dev’s death. You couldn’t have silenced Snoke in my head. Nothing you could have done, aside from killing me, would have helped me. You would have either joined me or died, too. That is why the Force ensured you weren’t there.”

Would she have done anything differently? Without everything she knew, would she have believed him? Would she have been able to convince him to stop? Rey remembered the desire for revenge she felt that night on Starkiller. If she had held Finn as he died, would she have killed Kylo? If she had been at that temple and watched him be betrayed by other Jedi, would she have done anything different than Jacen? They had been simple answers before. Now she wasn’t so certain. “I would have helped you sooner, when you were a child. I would have protected you from Snoke, I would have shown you that you weren’t alone.”

His eyes lost focus as he considered her assertion. “No, it wouldn’t have mattered.”

“You’re so sure.”

“Yes, Rey, I am,” he said, his voice tight with emotion. “No matter what, I was born with my grandfather’s blood in my veins. Even if you were there, my parents would have lied to me. They would have feared my darkness. Snoke would have found me. My parents would have abandoned me. Luke would have tried to kill me. And I would have turned. Nothing you or Dev or Jacen or Alema or Tionne could have done would change that.”
The tears were swelling again, but she still held desperately onto the hope that the Force had shown her those memories for a reason. “Fine. If I couldn’t have helped you before, maybe I still can now. I can do what Jacen couldn’t do for you… and what you couldn’t do for him.”

Kylo was silent, but she knew whose memory had brought the pain to his eyes. Of all the memories that she witnessed, the loss of Jacen to darkness cut her as deeply as the Dev’s death, because it had cut him as deeply. Everything that happened in his childhood paled in comparison to the pain she had felt – he had felt – when Jacen was lost to darkness.

*Maybe the key to bringing Ben back to the light is to turn Jacen.*

“It breaks my heart, Ben. You two were so close. It’s not too late. We could save him, too. I’ll help you...” she offered quietly.

“There is nothing left of Jacen to save, Rey. The Jacen I knew is gone. The Jacen I knew died that night at the temple with Dev,” he exhaled an uneven breath, the pain evident in his voice. “Ben Solo did, too.”

She thought about the memories she witnessed. She had seen the moment he had become Kylo, but believing that Ben Solo was gone was giving up hope in him. “You will never convince me that I am lying here in the arms of Kylo Ren.”

“Why is that?” His voice was distant. She didn’t have to search his eyes to know that his thoughts were somewhere else. She wished she could read his mind, but his barriers were high and strong. She nudged against his side of the bond, but he was unyielding.

“You may not see the change in you since we first met, but I do. You’re different – a good different. You want to do the right thing; I know you do. There’s nothing Kylo Ren about you, except maybe all these scars,” she said, watching the twitch of expressions cross his face as her fingers wandered over the rough ridge of his visible scars.

His mind snapped back to the present, his eyes pinning her with their intensity. She certainly had his attention. He hummed to feign disinterest, but she could see nervous bob of the apple of his throat and feel the rapid thrum of his heartbeat.

Rey wondered if it bothered him that her fingers trailed over his bare skin, when his memories
made clear his negative opinions on touch. She watched him carefully. He allowed it, as he had allowed her to touch his bare hand on Ahch-To, so she continued. "What are all these burns on your shoulders from?" She traced the wounds lightly with the tips of her fingers. He shuddered. There was something about touching him that was… thrilling, even when it was brushing over imperfections. They were his imperfections, and she wanted to memorize them all with her touch. Soothe them. There was a heated protectiveness she felt when she traced the grooves, even over the ones she had given him.

“Training droids.” She sensed gratitude for the change of subject. Physical pain was an easier matter for him to discuss.

She, however, did not share his apathy toward imagining him in pain. “You use training droids that burn you?”

His voice was light, almost... amused. “Their lightsabers do, yes.”

“Why?” Rey asked, truly curious. Was it the quick path to the darkness? Did he find twisted enjoyment in the pain?

"I learn faster."

She gently trailed her fingers over his chest, finding the ridges of old wounds hidden under the surface. The skin was smooth and soft; without touching him, she never would have known they were there. She supposed it was like the rest of him; there was far more to him beneath the surface. It was only when he let her close that she understood the truth.

As she traced them, she could almost feel the pain associated with each one, and the weight each burdened him to carry. “What are all these scars from?” Some she recognized, especially the fresh ones. Chewbacca’s bowcaster had left a large one on his lower abdomen. Finn had left one on his shoulder, as had she. None compared to the other one she left.

"Punishment," he replied quietly. He closed his eyes and swallowed the emotions she felt surfacing in the bond.

"For what?"
"Failure." The scars were merely the physical manifestations of the emotional wounds that cut deeper than even she had suspected. She reached up to trace the scar on his face. Her scar. He recoiled at her touch, catching her wrist before she could pull away. She winced in pain as his grip tightened.

“Ben?” His eyes snapped open, and he immediately released her, the bond vibrating in horror of his visceral reaction.

“Rey? Did I hurt you?” he choked. “I don't know what...” His body was all at once clammy, and his heart stuttered rapidly underneath her. He pushed up on an elbow to reach for her, but she jerked away from him. She wanted to run, get as far away from him as possible. Not because of what he had done, but because of her guilt for causing that reaction. If she didn't feel as if that moment in his arms was their last chance, she might have run from her shame as she had done in the throne room.

When the impulse faded, she saw the remorse in his eyes and fully comprehended what she could have done if she had left. He wouldn’t have seen it as her running from her shame, but running from him. It would have continued the misunderstanding and miscommunication to further deepen the chasm between them. Instead of continuing down the cycle that had been tearing them apart; she stayed. Her eyes were downcast in guilt as she finally spoke, “I shouldn't have... I don't know what I was... I'm sorry – for touching your scar and for being the one who caused it.”

“No, no, Rey. it's not you,” he assured her, dipping his chin so she would meet his gaze. “I didn't mean to panic. It's a reaction, sometimes, from... before. I thought that weakness was trained out of me years ago.”

The heat of anger immediately ignited underneath her skin. “Snoke?” her voice wavered with the fire of her hatred toward the monster. Kylo simply nodded, refusing to speak the creature's name aloud. “What did he do to you?”

It was his turn to avert his eyes in shame. “I told you; Nothing I didn't deserve.”

Remembering the instances of torture she had witnessed, and sensing he did not wish to relive those memories, she held her tongue. She didn't want to force him to relive it, either, nor did she want to know the depths of Snoke's depravity over the six or seven years he was in the creature's clutches, or the decades before when he was grooming him into the perfect apprentice. Rey sensed, however, that whatever the Force had shown her only skimmed the surface of what he’d endured. "Do you think you deserve the scar I gave you, too?"
“Yes,” Kylo said, dropping onto his back from his propped-up position. "But this is not like my other scars. I didn't leave it as a reminder of my failure. It is the best thing that ever happened to me." He bit his lip to suppress a smile. But she saw it. The corners of his eyes crinkled. Slight dimples accented his blushing cheeks.

"How so?" She had expected anger and resentment, but the bond swelled with admiration and something else... something fleeting, but warm and steady. He tilted his head to the ceiling to avoid her stare.

"It reminds me of you," his tone was inexplicably amused. He was describing less of a painful reminder and more of a thrilling memento. Rey felt regret for what she had done, now that she knew him, but she sensed none from him. He had access to skin grafts and bacta to erase the scar. He could have treated it. She had wondered why he chose to live with something so noticeable and permanent.

He left it not as a reminder of failure, but a reminder of... me?

"You want to be reminded of me?” Her voice sounded breathless, and she averted her gaze, twisting her fingers through the hem of her grey tunic. “Why?”

He studied her for a moment, before forming a captivated interest in the structure of the ceiling. Before Kylo could respond, she decided she didn't want to know the answer. “When you think of me, what’s the first thing you think of?” she asked instead. It was still bold, yes, and dangerous. She had left herself vulnerable, and she feared he would notice. He could hurt her with his response, though she would not dwell on why. He pleasantly surprised her when he exchanged her vulnerability for his own.

“Your eyes,” he said without hesitation. “Sometimes they’re warm brown. Sometimes they’re fierce green. It's your light, I think. You look at me, and I hate it, but your light finds my darkest shadows. And as much as I try to destroy it, it remains. Your name suits you and your eyes. Bright and hopeful, like the sun.” Her breath caught in her throat. His mother’s words replayed in her mind. Mostly to herself, but audible enough for him to hear, she repeated those words.

“Hope is like the sun,” she whispered. “If you only believe in it when you see it…” Kylo inhaled sharply, his fervent stare finding hers in an instant. She watched him mouth the rest of the words. He turned toward her slowly, searching her eyes answers.

“Where did you hear that?” his voice trembled. The cadence of his heart danced rhythmically against her open palm on his chest. Her pulse spiked with the hope that his mother was right.
“Your mother...” Rey breathed, searching his expression carefully. His face was stoic, but his eyes were fireworks of emotion. A shadow settled onto his features.

“Of course, Leia is... was forever hopeful. She loved that quote. But it is hard to believe in the sun when the darkness never ends.” There was darkness in his voice to match his words. In a moment of vulnerability, he had turned to the comfort of the dark, but she persisted. She had to know the truth.

“I heard she learned it from you, Ben,” she said. His lips parted, his eyes dilated, and his breathing quickened. He couldn’t temper the fear swelling in the bond.

_He knows. He remembers._

“It was the naïve ramblings of a weak little boy.” The answer was quick... almost rehearsed. She sensed the words were not his own, but she also knew they were words forged from his agitation. That could only mean one thing; he knew something, and she was breaking through.

She wouldn’t allow Snoke to continue his influence from the grave, on _either_ of them. “Was it or was that what _he_ wanted you to believe? If that was true, why would you hide it from me?”

“Hide what?”

“Do you remember the lullaby 'Mirrorbright?’” she asked, pinning him under her hand and stare. She wouldn’t let him avoid this answer. Kylo shuddered underneath her palm; it was all the answer she needed.

_Why didn’t you tell me?_  

“You do,” she said. It wasn’t a question. “I don't have any memories of when I was a little girl, but I do remember a lullaby from my dreams. I used to hum it to myself on lonely nights, waiting for my family.”

“I heard that lullaby in your memories, Ben. And imagine my surprise when your mother just gave me a music box with that very _Alderaanian_ lullaby. How would an orphan on Jakku know a lullaby
from a planet that was destroyed decades before she was even born?”

“I don’t...”

“No, Ben, you said you never lied to me; well, don’t you dare lie to me now,” she said, silencing his attempt at an alternative explanation. “When we first met, you looked and talked to me like I should know you. On Starkiller, you said, ‘It is you,’ and I didn’t understand it then, not until I talked to your mother. You saw that little girl in a vision a long time ago, didn’t you? And you sang her a lullaby.” He swallowed, preparing his words, stalling. “Didn’t you, Ben?”

Kylo's defenses fell.

“I convinced myself you weren’t real,” he murmured. “It wasn’t like the bond, but there was this girl in my dreams, for as long as I could remember. She was so lonely, and the nightmares kept her awake, like me. So I sang to her, like Leia would sing to me sometimes when I couldn't sleep. I didn't know what else to do for the girl. Even in her torment, she worried about me. She always said the same things; she was worried about me, she wanted to help me, she would call for me, asking where I was. I had no control when I would see her in my dreams, but she seemed to show up after the worst nightmares. She had sunshine eyes, and Leia would call her my ‘ray of hope’ in the darkness. Well, until I was fifteen years old. Then she was gone. She abandoned me like everyone else. When I was older, at Luke’s... at the temple, there was a flash in my dreams of an older girl’s face. But it was just a flash, and it was hard to see her eyes in the blue light, so I started to convince myself she wasn’t real. I tried to hold onto her hope, but after a while... the darkness won.”

Rey knew logically that there were parts of the story that only made sense if she was the girl, but she didn’t remember any of it. She didn’t remember him. It hurt her to know that, what would it do to him? “And you think I was the girl?”

He pushed himself up to face her and nodded.

They both tensed as Rey sat up and shouted at him. “Why would you never tell me!” She reacted defensively. Perhaps she was angry he kept something considerably significant from her. Perhaps it was to mask the fear of the consequences of his words. They had been bonded by something far more consequential than an accident, long before Snoke.

He’d had more than enough opportunities to tell her. She had nearly killed him, and she would have never known. She immediately appreciated her insignificance in the size of the universe, but simultaneously recognized her significance in the intricately woven fate in the Force. It was
important enough for the Force to ignite a chain reaction of events – beginning long before either of them were born – that undeniably led them to the present moment. Anxiety rose in her throat as she felt powerless to control her destiny. The implication of his dreams was all-consuming – and terrifying – to contemplate.

“This isn't something you keep from people, Ben! You didn’t think that was worth mentioning?”

“When was I supposed–”

“I don’t know, Ben, maybe when you knew?” she shouted, pushing away the darkness despite her anger. “Maybe when we first met? Maybe when you realized it was me before I cut you open on Starkiller? Maybe when we had our visions on Ahch-To? Maybe in the throne room when you were begging for me to join you? Or how about when you told me you killed my parents? On Kamino, or after Concordia, or in the forest or my temple room, or – Force! – anytime before I almost killed you! I deserved to know!”

“What was I supposed to say, Rey? ‘I know we’re enemies; you hate me so much that I physically repulse you and you call me a monster and try to kill me whenever you see me, but I used to have dreams about you before you were even born? You were the only light I held onto through years of darkness? I used to believe that finding you was my destiny?’ Yeah, I am so sure that would have gone well,” he spat sarcastically.

“Yes! Why couldn’t you have said that? It’s better than telling me that I’m nothing!”

“You’re not nothing,” his voice deep and low, his tone vehement. “What would you have done if I told you in the throne room? Would you have believed me? Would it have mattered? You still wouldn’t have stayed...”

“No, I couldn’t stay with the choice you made, but it would have changed everything between us sooner. I would have understood.” Kylo rolled to his back and stared up into the darkness. He was quiet. She feared losing him to his thoughts.

“And I don’t think you're a monster,” she continued. “If you think I would fight for you, fly across the galaxy to an enemy ship, and lie here like this with you if I thought you were a monster... then you don’t know anything about me. And if you think I am physically... repulsed... by you because I asked you to put on a cowl while I was trying to argue with you... then you don’t know anything about women,” she whispered.
She absent-mindedly trailed her fingers lightly across the expanse of his bare chest. He seemed warmer under her touch than he had a moment before. They both shivered, but he didn’t pull away. His stuttered breath shocked her back to reality. Rey stilled her hand, quickly changing the subject.

“How did you know I was that girl, Ben?”

He cleared his throat. “I was convinced the girl abandoned me like everyone else, but I never stopped thinking about her, even when Snoke told me it was all my imagination. I found myself searching for her energy among the crowds when I led my forces from world to world. Snoke tried to train it out of me, I tried to train it out of myself, but even at my darkest I was still searching for her. I had learned through Snoke’s training how to destroy my memories, and I had decided when I returned to Snoke, I would remove every memory of her to finally prove my loyalty.”

“The battle of Yashuvhu was my last mission before returning to the Supremacy. It was on that mission that I had a vision; I call it a vision because I don’t know what else it could be. It had been more than a decade since I had last seen the girl, but I thought I saw her at the end of the battle when I stood with the other Knights. It was raining, and she disappeared too quickly to see her face, but I swear I knew that Force signature from somewhere. I thought perhaps I remembered it from a dream. If the girl from my dreams and the girl from my vision were the same, then it seemed like the key to... something... everything.

“When this vision appeared right before I planned to willingly forget the girl, I believed there was a purpose in the Force, one even my master couldn’t see. I was not assigned the mission to retrieve the map, but I chose to go, to prove to myself that the Force wasn’t guiding me with that vision. That it meant nothing. When I landed on Jakku, I didn’t sense that signature in the Force, or I would have torn the world apart looking for her. I felt... an awakening... in the Force the following day, right before I heard that a girl had helped FN-2187 escape off Jakku, on the Falcon. It awakened something in me, something I had thought died a long time ago. I couldn’t shake this tugging in the back of my mind that somehow, she was important. When I landed on Takodana in search of the map, it led me straight to you. I thought it had to be all connected.

“When you and I first met, I swore I recognized you as the vision from Yashuvhu, or at least your energy. In the interrogation room, I removed my mask, but you looked at me like a stranger. I was supposed to find the map, but I searched your memories instead. I was hoping to find the same dream from my childhood, from the girl’s point of view. When I searched your mind, I was hoping to find... me.”

“I only found dreams of an ocean and an island, memories of my... father. I began to think Snoke was right, it was all in my mind. But when you called my grandfather’s lightsaber on Starkiller to avenge your friend – that fiery light in your eyes like the brightest sun– I knew it was you. I know it sounds crazy, but it was like I’d seen that moment before. When you accessed my training to defeat me, I knew that my fate was tied to yours. When we were bonded, I had hope. When I saw the vision in the hut, I was certain. You were that girl. That changed everything for me.”
“But this whole time... and you never told me?” Rey tried to hide the emotion in her voice. “Would you ever have told me? Did I not deserve to know? I could have killed you and never known any of this...” Lying back down next to him, she pressed on his shoulder to encourage him to turn on his side and face her. He obliged. Lying on their sides facing each other made Rey feel even more vulnerable than before.

Kylo sighed heavily as he adjusted his body to lie comfortably. When he was finished, the air between them seemed thicker. He was silent for a moment as he allowed her to search for the truth in his eyes. “I knew for certain in the hut, but my uncle interrupted us before I could say anything. Then you showed up on the Supremacy, and I was more focused on what I had to do. In the throne room, I was just trying to convince you to stay. You didn’t remember me. I knew the information I had about your parents would be more important to you than I would be. I thought that would be enough. And part of me was still worried Snoke had implanted that vision after what he said about using me to trap you. After that, it didn’t matter, you left. I meant nothing to you, our bond meant nothing to you. Why would the past mean anything?”

“Isn’t that my choice to make?” she murmured.

“I thought about it,” he said. “I thought maybe I would tell you if you could ever look at me with anything other than hatred. I thought maybe I would tell you when it would mean as much to you as it does to me. I just... I didn’t know what to make of it. I saw you in dreams my entire life, and then you showed up as my equal in the light. And you only knew me as a stranger, as your enemy. It made no sense, and I had no proof. You never saw me before Takodana, you didn’t remember me. What I saw doesn’t matter.” His voice was even and calm, but there was a slight edge of pain. It did hurt him that she didn’t remember.

"It's my fate, too. You should have told me, Ben, whether it scared you or not. I could have told you that even if I didn’t remember the dreams you remember, I had visions about you, too.”

His lips trembled in what she could only describe as relief. It gave her the courage to continue, knowing it would change everything between them. “Not as a child, I don't think, those dreams were more like whispers. I don't remember anything before my parents’ ship flew away. I never felt the Force until I touched Luke’s lightsaber on Takodana, minutes before I met you. That was when I had my first vision of you. What the Force showed me, it all concerned you. I saw you as a child in a corridor with Snoke, the burning of the temple, and in the snow on Starkiller. That was also when I saw you with the Knights of Ren on that planet in the rain, but it had to have been years after you were there. I don't understand any of it. The visions were more like nightmares to me, but maybe I just didn't know how to interpret them yet.”

He let out a deep breath and closed his eyes. "I knew it. I knew it couldn’t have been just me. This bond between us was never Snoke's doing, he only tapped into something that was already there. It was our destinies to meet, Rey."
Rey felt like every choice she had ever made had not been her own, but rather a predetermined stroke on some unfathomable canvas, and she was too close to see the whole painting. If everything had been predestined, could she save him? Could she save Finn? She stared at his face until his eyelids fluttered open. She searched his eyes for comfort in the uncertainty. “And that doesn’t bother you?”

“It terrifies me.”

Rey was quiet for a moment, before she whispered, “Well then, what does the Force want from us, Ben?”

“I don’t know, yet. But if I have had visions of you my entire life, that has to mean something, right? We are enemies because we have been told we are supposed to be. But they don’t know what we know. I can’t see these visions, feel this bond and dream of you my entire life and still believe that our only destiny is to kill each other.”

"I could have killed you, and you could have killed me,” she reminded him, “so are you saying the Force intervened?”

“I think Crait was the closest I came to… to…. I felt so betrayed. I don't remember much after waking up to Hux instead of you in the throne room. But I would have regretted it once the darkness cleared. You were foolish to let me live.”

She rolled her eyes and snorted. He truly was an enigma. “What about on Starkiller?”

"I could have,” he confirmed. “I could have pushed you off that cliff. I didn’t want to.”

Rey couldn’t help but smile. “Is that why you broke your ‘never hesitate’ rule?”

“How…” His eyes tracked her smile before wandering over the rest of her face. “I have broken many of my ‘rules’ for you, but I told you on Starkiller, I wanted to teach you.”

"The dark side?”
"Dark side or light side...it’s all learning the ways of the same Force... don’t forget that,” he said. “I felt you access the Force to draw knowledge of training and fighting techniques from me. How is that any different? I wanted to teach you how to reach your full potential. You still don't realize it, even now. You can do unimaginable things."

"I’ve read most of Luke's Jedi texts, and they say the teachings of the light and the dark are very different –"

"Do you have the journal Science of Creating Life?" Kylo grasped her shoulder, his eyes wide as he searched hers intently. It wasn’t the first time he learned she had the texts; he had taught her to read them, but he acted as if it was. Her breathing quickened with his. There was an urgency to his tone and almost ... hopefulness.

Her eyes narrowed. “Why?”

"I need it. It’s important."

She wasn’t certain she wanted to know what he would use it for, but she didn’t want to offend him by asking. Still, she couldn’t hide the suspicion in her eyes. “How important?”

“Life or death important.” His own eyes were guarded, and she knew he would not reveal more. She wanted to press him, wanted to know why. If it was for the First Order, he wouldn’t trust her with their secrets.

*How important can one ancient book be?*

She worried her lip as he studied her, waiting for her response, waiting for her to trust him. Could she? "If I give it to you, will you help me?"

Rey watched the disappointment fall over his features, but he nodded. “Yes.” His voice was tight, almost sharp, when he answered her. She wondered what he believed she would ask.

Fiddling with the edge of her tunic, she worked up the nerve to ask him. Would he laugh? Would he be angry? She was still his enemy, after all. “Even if I ask you to help me rebuild a lightsaber?”
His expression softened and his voice lost its edge. "That I can do."

"Promise?"

"I promise, Rey," he assured her. The twitch of a smile played on the corner of his lips. She searched his eyes as he steadily held her gaze. It was the truth. He tenderly brushed a stray hair from her face, but immediately stiffened when he realized what he had done. He continued, eyes downcast, slightly abashed. "And I'll help you build one even if you don't trust me enough to give me that journal. You should know that. But you don't need to build one, you can take mine. I have the means to make another."

Rey understood the significance shrouded in his offer. A lightsaber was more than just personal, it was an extension of himself. To give her his lightsaber, was to give her himself. It was a connection to his very soul... and the last connection to Ben Solo. "You would give me your lightsaber?"

"Yes," he said. "Because of our bond, it will respond to you as does me, maybe even more." He summoned his lightsaber and handed it to her. She trailed her fingers over the grooves in the hilt, remembering how powerful it made her feel in the throne room... and standing above him.

She laid it reverently down next to him and watched his entire body tense as he braced for rejection. Without hesitation, she wrapped her arms around him. He tensed further, but didn’t pull away. "The gesture means a lot to me," she whispered. "It really does, but I cannot accept it. You need it. It suits you. And it has a connection to you still, even if you believe it is gone. Maybe you can help me, rebuild this one or a new one, together?"

He nodded, distracted by her arms wrapped around him. It would take time, but she would teach him to enjoy a hug again. She would have tried to convince him to relax if she wasn’t battling unease herself. The thought of building her own lightsaber was daunting. Logically, she knew she would have to intentionally dominate the crystal – she had watched him do it to his own – but she feared the color her crystal would be if she had to find a new one.

"Ben, I’m afraid. What if my crystal is red?"

Kylo pulled away from her embrace. "You’re afraid? That I’ll do to your crystal what I do to everything else I touch?" The words stung when formed by his lips. They were the same words she had screamed at him in her temple room as she threw droid parts at him. She swallowed the guilt
tightening in her throat and shook her head. She wasn’t concerned about his darkness; she feared her own.

“No, Ben, I’m afraid I won’t be good enough. How do I know I’ll pick the right one?” She could hear unease slipping into her voice. She knew he heard it, too. “How do I know what color it will be?” Tears blurred her vision, but she blinked them away. When she found his stare again, she found remorseful understanding.

Kylo soothed her fears by rubbing his thumb along the soft slope of her shoulder, though she was certain he wasn’t conscious of it. He rarely touched her. “You will find a world with Kyber crystal caves, and the crystal will choose you. Crystals begin colorless, and when you form a bond with the crystal, the color of your crystal becomes what is inside of you. But it won’t be red, I promise, not unless you bleed it like I did.”

“But I have darkness. What if I bleed it accidentally?” Rey feared what the Resistance would do if her lightsaber was red. Would they force her to leave? What would she do? She could never be a Jedi.

“You won’t,” he reassured her. “I had darkness, but mine was blue. You saw my memories. What I did – it was no accident.”

Rey was relieved for once by his logic, but she sensed the return of his self-directed resentment and shifted her focus to something less painful. "If I can’t find a Kyber world and I fix this lightsaber, will it need crossguards?"

“Maybe,” he said after a moment of thought. My crystal is cracked, which causes unstable thermal reactions and unstable heat. The quillons are lateral vents to divert the heat, otherwise it would explode. Which it did. Twice. Your crystal is broken, so theoretically it could work without the vents, but I don’t know what it will do to the plasma in the chamber. You may need vents, but you’ve wielded mine, you’ll be fine. I like it - it's more intimidating… and just as deadly.” The memory of how deadly it could be flashed before her eyes. She was quiet as she attempted to force the images from her mind. She couldn’t reconcile the violence that night on the skywalk and the man she was bonded to. She had asked him before, and she had seen his memories, she knew the answer. Did he? Did he regret it?

“Ben, why did you kill your father?” she whispered, voice trembling as she struggled to suppress her tears. She knew he was changing, she knew he wanted to change, but would he admit that to himself?
“Rey...” he warned, his voice heavy with emotion.

“You said I could ask anything.”

His tone, his eyes, his side of the bond was pleading. “I don’t want to fight you again. I don’t want you to leave.”

And I don’t want you to shut me out again, but I have to know.

“I won’t, I promise. I just want to understand why,” she whispered. Kylo hesitated, shifting onto his back as his eyes wandered away from her. Unsteady breaths escaped his quivering lips, his muscles contracted and loosened against her as he clenched his fists. If she believed she had more chances, she wouldn’t put him through it again while he was still grieving his mother. The thought of what Poe wanted her to do was never far from her thoughts, and she was running out of time. Still, she wondered if she had pushed it too far.

“You may not get the answer you were hoping for.”

“The only answer that I am hoping for is the truth,” she said. He stared at the wall until his eyes glossed over, almost as if he was staring right through it.

Please look at me. Please don’t hide from me again.

“I did it to kill the light left in me, to sacrifice everything I had left to the dark side.” He refused to move his eyes from his fixed stare into nothingness. “So I could have peace.”

“But you almost didn't do it.”

“I thought about going home. Or leaving for good, flying off into the Wilds, never to be seen again....” He was quiet for a moment, preparing himself for the wound he would be reopening by indulging her. She held her breath, fearful he would change his mind. “I realized there was no home for me to go back to after everything I had done, and everything they had done to me. For him to believe that I could just go with him was foolish. Or a lie. None of them had cared about saving me until I had fallen. The things I had done, the people I had lost, everything I had sacrificed would have been for nothing.”
“But they did want you home, everything your mother ever talked about –”

“I listened to his thoughts for the truth. And I found a memory of my mother begging him to bring me home. It hadn't even been his idea. He was just doing it for her. He never cared about me.”

“Ben…”

“It’s true,” he said, the pain cracked through his voice. “Han was only there for you, otherwise, he would have come for me sooner. You were gone a day or two, and he breached a secure First Order weaponized planet for you. He left me with my uncle at the temple and never came back for me. Not once. In over a decade. Not once when I trained with Luke. Not once when I had fled to the First Order. He only tried to turn me to save you.”

“Ben, he had already found me,” she said, wishing he would look at her. “He set the charges. He could have left, but he stayed for y –”

“He should have left!” he shouted, pressing the heels of his hands over his eyes. His entire body was trembling, and she immediately regretted putting him through that. “Or in those last seconds, I should have pointed the emitter chamber toward my own heart, forced him to watch the life fade from my eyes. That fate he deserved. But he wouldn’t have walked out of there; the entire First Order was watching us. If I didn’t…”

Kylo paused as his voice broke. He exhaled a shuddering breath. She didn’t have to see his face to know she would find tears there. “If I didn’t help him, he would have died either way. So I did the next best thing; I ended it before they could do worse. I didn’t lie when you asked me if I hated him. I didn’t. I convinced myself to do it because I loved him, even if he wouldn’t do the same for me. It was easier to trigger it than I thought it would be. The words he said to me... it was an echo of the moment I had done it before, when it wasn't Han, but an expendable prisoner. And when I triggered that lightsaber, when I had the strength to do it, I did feel peace. It was finally over…”

“And then he touched me, like I meant anything to him. I shouldn’t have looked in his eyes. He knew he was dying, but you should have seen it, Rey, he looked at me like his son. He had every reason to hate me, but right then Han was everything I had wished he could be my entire life. And it was too late. I could never take it back.”

This. This was what she had been waiting for. “If you could, would you take it back?”
“It doesn’t matter.” His voice was sharp and jagged on the surface, but she knew him well enough to know there was regret buried underneath and she would unearth it. She could feel how close he was to turning; it was as if they were standing at the edge of the precipice. If they only took a few more steps, he’d have to face the truth.

“It does to me,” she said, urging him that much closer. “I need to hear you say it.”

*Prove to yourself that Ben Solo is still in there.*

“I regret it more than you will ever understand.” She bit back the relief that bubbled in her throat, he was so close to seeing his dark path for what it was. She waited quietly for him to come to the same realization she had; he couldn’t be the man who killed his father any longer. “If I could give my life to bring him back, I would.” The words dripped like venom from his tongue. She had opened a nerve; his pain seeped into the Force around them like a heavy cloud. “I thought I found the answer – a life for a life – but I was wrong.”

The words were ominous. What answer? Was *that* what he wanted the book for? If it was, she wouldn’t give it to him. She fiercely disliked the idea that he had considered trading his life for his father, and she knew Han wouldn’t have wanted that. His thoughts were growing darker. She had to redirect him back to the light, back to hope, back to saving himself. “Ben, did Snoke ask you to kill him?”

“No.”

*That’s not true, it can’t be.*

“No?”

“He told me I had never ‘faced such a test’ and I knew ‘what I had to do.’” He murmured. “But that was my choice.”

“But he *wanted* you to,” she pressed. “Han had no Force powers, you were estranged, why would Snoke want you to kill him?” Her tone was gentle, in fear of further agitating him, but she knew she had to keep probing deeper.
You have to see what I see in you. Then you'll turn.

“Han tried to warn me,” he said, with less provocation than he had before. “He told me Snoke was only using me for my power. I wish I never had the Force, I wish I could be free from the shadow of my bloodline, I wish I could be the hero who didn't need anyone or anything like Han. I hated it, tried to deny it, but I still wished I could just... be like him. It was the reason Snoke asked me to kill him. He knew the foolish sentiment I still held for my father. If I had just hated him, he would still be alive.”

It was twisted, and painful to hear, but Rey knew it was the truth. Snoke knew he would never truly have Kylo until he broke that connection. “You have your father's heart,” he had told him in his memories. Snoke was jealous and wanted Kylo to himself. Snoke feared him, just like everyone else did. He needed to control him, and he could only do that when he was weak. Snoke guided him to make the ultimate sacrifice to do it, in the promise of being stronger than Vader. He knew the torment Kylo would suffer at the loss of his father. Even after he proved himself to be a worthy apprentice, it was not enough for Snoke. It was never going to be enough. She knew all of it from his memories, but she never expected him to realize it, too. “Peace is a lie, Rey. He used me to destroy my uncle, he used me to lure you into a trap. My father was right, when I was of no use anymore, he would have killed me, just like Luke failed to do.”

“If you know what he did, why stay with the First Order?” she pressed.

Please, Ben.

She curled in tighter against him, refusing to look into his eyes in fear of what she would find there. “If I left, my father's death would be for nothing,” he breathed into her hair. It wasn’t an admittance that he was ready to turn, but it was close enough; she still had hope

“But Han died trying to save you,” she said, her heart pounding against its cage in plea. “If you can't be saved, then his death will be for nothing.”

“I can't be saved, Rey.”

No, I won't let you do this again.

“No? Then why didn’t you kill your mother?” She was desperate, searching for the key to getting through to him. He sighed in frustration, and she wondered if those were the words that would
She didn’t expect him to answer.

“I don’t know. I wanted to... but then I felt her. She wasn’t even angry with me. After everything I did. After the monster I became. I only felt her love for me, and her foolish hope that one day I would come home,” he exhaled slowly at the thought as he blinked back tears. “I knew Snoke was wrong. Killing her wouldn’t end the conflict tearing me apart. It would make it worse, just like the death of my father did. I knew, but it wasn't enough to break my loyalty to him, and now she’s dead because I didn’t think fast enough to stop those missiles,” he said through clenched teeth. “No one could’ve broken my loyalty to Snoke, not until you. He underestimated what I would do for you.”

She wanted to say every thought that burst into her mind.

*Not enough to turn*, was her first thought.

Or

*Why me?*

Or

*What exactly would you do for me?*

She didn’t ask him any of it, because she noticed his eyes grow distant. She was losing him to his thoughts again. “Ben.” She didn’t know why she did it, but she wrapped her fingers around his wrist and trapped his hand between her palm and her cheek, forcing him to look at her. His eyes found hers immediately, dragging him back to the present. “What do you want from me, Rey?”

*To turn*, she thought. She believed with everything in her that he could, so she pressed on.

“Why did you kill all those innocent people on Hosnian Prime? There were children.”

“Believe it or not, under Snoke, I did not make all the decisions for the First Order,” he said. She could hear the resentment in his tone, but she wasn’t sure if it was directed toward her or his former master. “Hosnian Prime was Hux. Starkiller was his endeavor. Snoke knew when I found
the plans for Starkiller on Malachor that I didn’t agree with the weapon being created. I thought they would only use the weapon as a threat, but Snoke lied; that had never been their intention. He hid their plans from me until they were prepared to use it against the Republic. I was off-world when they unleashed its destruction on the galaxy. I was powerless to stop it.”

Yes, Ben. You know the truth, don’t you?

Rey could see it; this would be how he’d realize that everything he had killed for was a lie. He had admitted more than she could have hoped for about Snoke and his father. He had said it himself, he regretted all of it. He wanted to give his own life to save his father, he knew Snoke had used him, he knew what the First Order did at Hosnian Prime was wrong. He could finally see the First Order for what it was and turn. Come home. She could save him, all he had to do was realize that destruction was no longer a path he wanted to follow. “Then why not leave the First Order?”

Say it. You have no reason to stay.

She stared into his eyes, pleading with him to give voice to the words she knew he felt. Something was reflecting in them, however, that made her heart clench. She could feel her hope fade.

Please, don’t do this again, Ben.

“Rey,” his voice was soft, but it didn’t soothe the bitter sting that accompanied them. “I’m the Supreme Leader now, so I can assure that there are no more Hosnian Primes. And I may not have agreed with their method, but I agreed with the principle. I still do. The New Republic had to be defeated.”

No!

“No, Ben. What about the innocents!” she demanded, pulling herself further from his grasp to search his face, as his hand slid from her cheek to her arm. She was too concerned to care, hoping that the progress they had made was not unraveling before her eyes. In her heart, however, she knew. The pain and conflict had faded from his eyes; he was still holding onto a lie.

Why?

“Rey, sometimes the loss of innocent lives is a necessary evil. Do you think Luke considered all
the maintenance workers, mechanics, contractors, families, and prisoners located on the Death Star when he destroyed it? Did you consider them on Starkiller? Or the stormtroopers like FN-2187 that had been brainwashed as children and could have been turned to your cause? No. Why? Because it was for the greater good. It was the price of war.” Rey was quiet as his words settled over them. His logic terrified her. She knew his reasoning was flawed, that mass genocide could not be explained away as a "necessary evil." But he spoke with such conviction that for an instant it nearly sounded reasonable. And after Luke’s third lesson on Ahch-To, she wasn’t certain his uncle would have disagreed.

It’s impossible. You couldn’t believe these things. You couldn’t think you’re right in this.

She couldn’t argue it with him; they would never find common ground. Poe would argue similar beliefs for the opposite side; she knew well enough that moral righteousness was subjective in war. That was not something she could change in either of them overnight. She searched instead for a way to lead him back to the path of regret again. She still had hope in him. “Then what about the other students at Luke’s temple?” she tried. “I saw what happened. You could have left them alive.”

He closed his eyes, his fingers twitching on her arm as if he feared she would flee. Despite her agitation, she laid her hand over his in assurance. Her heart fluttered when he gripped her tighter. “Rey, I know you're hoping to find excuses for everything I've done, to give you reason not to give up on me. But it’s not that easy; there isn't some convenient reason that absolves me from what I've become. I’m not a spy for the Resistance, and I wasn’t possessed by some evil entity. I killed people, by my own free will, because I am a monster. That is the truth you're seeking.”

“Ben, please...”

“I don’t remember why I killed them... survival... revenge... The ones who believed me about Skywalker’s betrayal became the Knights of Ren, like Jacen. I killed the ones who took Skywalker’s side, who defended Cade.”

“What about Tionne?”

Please, come back to me.

She was losing him, she could almost feel him grasp desperately onto his convictions. “When I first joined Snoke my only purpose was to eliminate all the Jedi and destroy the Jedi Order. It… it is still my purpose. I became the Jedi Killer. I did what I had to do. If I didn’t kill her, she could have become the next Skywalker. She could have grown stronger, trained others in the error of
their ways and eventually killed the other Knights.”

“Ben, how is that any different than me?” His thumb rubbed her arm gently, almost reflexively, as he considered an answer that never came. Instead, he turned onto his back again, as his eyes focused above him. He was running away. The conversation had not turned the way Rey had hoped. He was defending unfathomable mass murder, rather than realizing that he was not the monster everyone wanted him to be.

Still, she wouldn’t give up on him. If he wouldn’t admit the truth, she would force him to see it. Her most challenging task was to convince him to stay long enough to have a chance. “You are called the Jedi Killer...and I am called the Last Jedi.” Despite the dire consequences of his words, and hers, she found herself struggling to stifle a smile at the ridiculous monikers.

Kylo turned his head to glare at her, but she caught him rolling his lips to suppress a smile. He seemed all too eager to accept the temporary peace offering she had extended to him with her jesting words, avoiding the perilous spiral the debate would have taken. “Are you mocking me?”

“No, never,” she said unconvincingly. He snorted. “Well, perhaps. It's just... I don’t think you’re doing a very good job with me.” Her attempt to suppress a grin failed miserably as she bit her lip. He huffed a breath, which Rey interpreted as an almost chuckle.

“I suppose not,” he said, amusement coloring his tone.

“What would your friends think?”

“I suppose it’s a good thing I don't have friends.” He had said it lightly. She knew it wasn't meant to be taken seriously, but it stung because she knew it held truth.

“What about me?” she asked quietly, allowing her hand to travel over the soft vein in his neck and along the line of his jaw. He swallowed thickly. She had been drawn to touch him since that night in the hut – to prove to herself that he was real – but now that she had, she couldn’t help exploring him – both emotionally and physically. Was it socially acceptable? She had no idea. But he didn’t stop her.

There was something warm and comforting she felt when his heated skin was under her palm. Even if his words were disappointing, it made her want to touch him even more; to hold onto him desperately in fear that she would lose him. Somewhere along the way she had become invested in
the fate of Kylo Ren, and though she knew it was his own fight through the darkness, she couldn’t help trying to be the light that would help guide his perilous journey out. “Am I not your friend?”

He tilted his head down to study her face, locks of dark hair falling across his eyes. She fought the urge to sweep it back; that gesture felt too intimate. “I don’t think you want to be friends, Rey.”

“Well, I don’t make a habit of lying in bed with my enemies,” she said softly. He considered her answer for a moment, his eyes piercing through any defenses she could have created.

“You didn't answer my question, Ben.”

“I would kill for you, or give up my life for you,” he said, refusing to meet her gaze as he stared over her shoulder. “Does that count?”

“I’d prefer if you didn’t die for me,” she replied, “And it depends on who you would kill for me.”

“I suppose FN-2187 is out of the question.”

She knew it was his deadpan humor, but it forced her to consider the truth behind it. “After everything we've been through, would you still kill my friends?” She begged him to show the remorse she had seen earlier. “Would you kill someone even if I asked you not to?”

Kylo did not hesitate to answer. “Yes, if I had the right reasons, I would take the life of just about anyone, whether you asked me to or not.” His tone was impassive, not a hint of remorse or conflict in his voice. “If, for instance, they threatened your life.”

“But Ben, if you kill the people I care about, then you hurt me. You might as well cut me with your weapon,” she reasoned. “And if I ask you not to kill someone, but you choose to do it anyway, then you are breaking my trust in you. That's like breaking a promise.”
His brows furrowed slightly at her mention of a promise. She watched the conflict in his eyes as he struggled with the truth of her words. “Your life is more important than all of that. I can survive your hatred of me,” he said stubbornly, but she sensed that her words affected him more than it appeared.

“What about me, Ben?” Before Rey could catch herself, she brushed his raven hair from his forehead, his eyes bright in wonder at the gesture. He didn't comment on her lapse in judgment, but his eyes followed her hand as she rested it gently over his heart. “Would you kill me?”

“Never,” he breathed.

“Why not? I’ve betrayed you, I’ve left you, I’ve used you, I’ve lied, I’ve done everything they did.”

Why kill all these people but spare me?

He inhaled deeply as he considered her question. His eyes begged her to see what he didn’t want to put to words. This was something important, it would bring change, she could feel it. She waited. He chewed his lip before drawing in the Force for strength. “Rey, you are the only person who matters to me in the entire galaxy. Take that to mean whatever you want.” Her breath was trapped in her throat. The lilt of his steady heartbeat caressed her fingers through his chest. She felt the devotion and loyalty warm her through the bond before his shields were raised again. She had not been prepared for that kind of honesty. Frozen in his vulnerability, his eyes studied hers intently as he waited for her response.

She wasn’t prepared to search for the truth in her own feelings. She had succeeded in denying the extent of the emotions in her conflicted heart. Panic overwhelmed her. She wasn’t ready to face any of it.

Rey desperately sought for a question to distract herself from the emotions threatening to spill over into the bond. “How many...” she paused, chewing her lip, “how many people have you killed?”

Kylo shifted his glare away from her in disapproval of her question, a muscle in his jaw twitching in agitation. Rey could almost see the hope die in his eyes. She knew she was the one running away this time, but what was she supposed to say? She was betraying her friends, lying in the arms of her enemy; the man she was supposed to hate, the man she was supposed to kill. And it felt... right.
She knew she would continue to betray her friends in her pursuit to help save him, find belonging with him. What kind of person did that make her? In the end, did it matter what she wanted? No matter how she felt, or he said he felt about her, he was still on the wrong side of the war. He was still the Supreme Leader of the First Order. She couldn't forget that, and she refused to explore any of it until he had proven he was the man she knew he was. If her only way to escape those thoughts was to run away from them, then so be it.

Kylo didn’t push the issue, which she was grateful for. Instead, he returned to ponder his thoughts while staring at the ceiling. “That is a complicated question.”

“It’s not, Ben” she stared up at him, tears in her eyes.

_How many? Ten? Fifty? Oh Force, one hundred?_

His voice sounded remarkably even and casual for the severity of the subject. “It is, Rey. Do you count by my hand or that I’m responsible for?”

“What’s the difference?”

_Please just tell me a number._

She held her breath apprehensively. The longer she lay in his embrace, the more difficult it was to deny her complicated feelings for him. Did she want to know? What if she realized he was beyond saving, could she walk away and still pretend it didn’t hurt? What was the line, the number, that would make her abandon hope? How would she know what the right decision was when they were entangled in this impossible war?

“Take Tuanul – the village on Jakku where I captured your pilot... I killed an old friend of my family’s, Lor San Tekka, after he gave the pilot the map to Skywalker. But I ordered the stormtroopers to eliminate all the remaining villagers for harboring a fugitive of the First Order. Your FN-2187 hesitated to kill under my orders; he’s a liability to the Resistance.”

Rey huffed with irritation, giving him a pointed look as he continued, “Regardless, I am responsible for every villager’s death, but I only took one life myself. Or Concordia. My men were responsible for the deaths of the entire tribe on my orders; my hands were only responsible for a few that had been captured for information. Or in the vision you had of me with the Knights of
Ren. Do you count the villagers I killed myself or how many we all killed together?” She shook her head, swallowing the bile rising in her throat. Despite the ache behind her ribs, she allowed him to continue.

“So what is it, Rey?” his tone pedantic. “Is it just those by my hand, like my father, or those I am responsible for, like the people on Concordia and the dozens of other worlds in the Unknown Regions my troops and the Knights conquered? And if you include those I am responsible for, does it matter if I was following orders or if it was by my orders alone? Does it matter if they were killed by others in the Order, making me guilty by association, considering that is how the Republic would charge me for War Crimes? If I was punished for my crimes by your friends, I would be held accountable for Hosnian Prime. If that's the case, then the destruction of the New Republic sets my total at millions... perhaps billions. How about the troops on my side that lost their lives under my command? I am responsible for their deaths as well. And do you count people like Snoke and the Praetorian guard? Or are you only counting people you don't agree with me killing?”

Why did the war and this man and her bond and morality have to be so complicated?

“I don’t know, Ben.” Rey buried her face in his chest, and he wrapped his arms around her. “I don’t know what the right answer is.” She wanted to cry or scream or break something fragile. She wanted the galaxy to know that it wasn’t fair that Ben Solo became this man. It wasn’t fair that this man was the only person in that galaxy she wanted to be bonded with. The war, her orders, her desires, her place in it all – it wasn’t fair. It took him a moment of hesitation, before he wrapped his arms around her tightly, accepting that as much as she hated his actions, she needed his comfort.

“Three hundred and eight.”

She pulled her face away from his warmth to stare at him. “What is that?”

“Three hundred and eight people,” he whispered, but she could hear the waver in his voice. “By my hand.”

It was everything she feared. The number was staggering, far beyond her hopes. She had seen him kill in her visions of him, had heard him speak of the villages he slaughtered, had watched him kill people with her own eyes, but she had never expected that. The tears rose unbidden to her eyes, and she leaned into his chest again to hide them. “How could you…”

*How could you not regret the lives you’ve taken? How can you lie here and talk about murder as if it was nothing? How can you be two different people?*
“I never said I didn’t regret the lives I’ve taken,” Kylo said after a moment of silence, reminding her of her bad habit of projecting. “But have you stopped to think maybe I’m not two different people?”

“Do you regret the lives you’ve taken?” she asked, ignoring her projection and his other assertion. She couldn’t see the emotions in his eyes while pressed up against his chest, but he said enough by not answering her question.

“How many have you killed, Rey?”

She shook her head defiantly. “No, I am the one asking the questions. In fact, you are not allowed to ask any more questions. Especially while answering my questions. I know your games, Ben.”

He hummed.

“Humor me,” he murmured into her hair. “Unless you would rather deflect?”

“I am not deflecting,” she said with conviction. He huffed another half-chuckle, she felt the heat of it against her temple and the vibration of it against her palm. “It’s different... that was survival.”

“War...survival...revenge...different dagger, same blade.”

“I would never kill someone who wasn’t trying to kill me.” She knew he wanted to turn her, so she would join him to rule the First Order. I am not like you, Ben. She expected him to pull away from her in anger, but her words had little noticeable effect on him.

“Ah... are you sure?” he asked in his derisive Kylo way that, for a split second, made her reconsider deepening the scar on his infuriating face. “You shot first, if I remember correctly. I first remember your darkness on Starkiller. You could have run when I went for my grandfather’s weapon. But you activated your weapon, my grandfather’s weapon, first. You charged me. You wanted to kill me, Rey, not because you were defending yourself. You wanted to kill me as revenge for FN-2187... and my father. Do I blame you? No. I deserved it.”

“But your darkness is rising, just as it did in me, to levels I never believed possible. When I was
your age, I was not responsible for a single death... yet. In a few weeks, you have gone from trying to kill me on Starkiller to contemplating killing me in my sleep with my own lightsaber, because you hated me. If you believe your reasons are justified to kill for – revenge, war, survival – then you are justifying the reasons why I have killed.”

She was quiet for a moment, digesting his frustrating logic.

Why can’t you see that it's not the same? You were the enemy, you were killing people I cared for. I had no other choice. I had to do it for the sake of the galaxy. And when I took your lightsaber, it was the darkness... but you already knew that, because you were awake. Yet you let me do it. You could have defended yourself. You could have stopped me. You could have said... anything.

"Ben, why were you going to let me kill you?"

He snaked his arms tighter around her. "I wanted to know if you would do it."

Her throat tightened at the admission, overwhelmed with conflict. Her emotions were at war; part of her was remorseful that he was so obviously tortured, and part of her was furious that he gambled with his own life. "So, what... you would just let me kill you to satisfy your curiosity? Force, Ben!"

"If you really want to kill me, Rey, then I won't stop you," he murmured. She shook her head in frustration, biting back tears. I don’t understand. She had fought for fourteen years to survive in the harshest of conditions. Giving up had never once crossed her mind, even when the hope of survival was grim.


Rey was his enemy and yet she wondered if there was ever a time she had seen his life as expendable as he did. There had been more times than she could count that she had held his fate in her hands – had imagined taking it – yet she had never found it her right to do so. Even on Starkiller, when she hated him the most, she had the chance to end it all but hadn't. She had chosen not to do it in the throne room, even though she was heartbroken. And even when the darkness called her, and Snoke himself beguiled her to do it, she still couldn't kill him. She faced an ultimatum to end his life, but found his life meant more to her than any punishment by the Resistance. She truly did want to save him, more than she would ever admit. What would that mean for their future? Should she warn him of the Resistance's plans? What would he do? What would he ask her to do? All she knew, was that she wouldn't willingly help them. "Well, thankfully
"I couldn't kill you."

"I know. I'm grateful, for your sake," he whispered, resting his chin on her head.

She rolled her eyes at the ease at which he manipulated a conversation. "My sake?"

"I told you, I sense the darkness in you."

Rey pulled back from his embrace so she could study his face. "This... coming from the Prince of Darkness, who asked me to join him, and has seen how hate made me strong enough to best him on Starkiller." She grinned as she traced her finger along his scar. She didn’t know why she had done it, but by the time she had done it the damage had been done. Except, it hadn’t. This time, he didn’t flinch under her touch. He huffed a near chuckle instead.

"Snoke called me son of darkness. I am no prince."

“Your mother was a princess,” she reminded him.

He leveled a pointed look at her, but there was no heat behind it. “Of a world that no longer exists.”

“So what you're saying is... I'm Nothing and you're a Prince of Nothing.” She smirked in amusement, crinkling her nose. Kylo made a choking sound in his throat, but it only encouraged her. “Prince Ben. I like the sound of that.”

“You do remember that I am essentially the emperor of the galaxy, right?”

_How could I forget?_

Her finger trailed from his scar to the shell of his exposed ear, an endearingly boyish feature that was usually hidden in the sea of his raven locks. “I like Prince Ben better.”

“Ah,” he sighed in understanding. “You wish for me to have a respectable title without any of the
power.”

Rey smiled as their eyes met. “Precisely.”

Kylo groaned in irritation, but his grip tightened around her, suggesting he felt otherwise. She had never felt safer than she did right then in the arms of her enemy. “I would have joined you,” she admitted quietly, the smile fading from her lips as swiftly as it had appeared. “If you were the Prince of Nothing, instead of the Prince of Darkness.” His breath hitched in his chest. He blinked rapidly as he digested her confession, and she wished he allowed her to be privy to the thoughts in his head. She searched his eyes for an indication of the emotions that were undoubtedly raging inside him, but he glanced away, refusing to look at her.

“I never asked you to join the darkness, Rey,” his voice was strained, the apple of his throat bobbed as he swallowed thickly. “Just me...”

“But it was the darkness in you asking me,” she objected. He nodded, in agreement to what, exactly, she could only guess, and dragged her closer to him so she couldn't see the expression on his face. But she could feel his pain in the bond. “Ben,” she said carefully, “if you live in darkness and asked me to be by your side in the company of darkness, then why do you fear my darkness? I don't understand.”

“The Jedi were wrong. Hate... anger... suffering... has its place. Darkness has its place. But darkness can easily consume you, Rey. I recognize myself in you, and that's why it scares me. There's so much light in you. If you killed me, you would have opened the floodgates to that darkness. Thankfully, you are stronger than me, and resisted its temptation...”

*If you only knew, Ben.*

“The way you channel your hate and anger has served you well. I fear that you will reach a point where you can no longer control it, as I did. I'm not Luke, I'm not asking you to eliminate it completely. You demonstrated the power of your darkness on Starkiller, but it was your light that spared me. It makes you unique. It makes you far better than I could ever hope to be. Don't lose that. But don't lose that warrior spirit either. The way you manipulated the darkness to challenge and best me on Starkiller that night is one of my favorite things about you.”

"The Resistance doesn’t think so,” she said before she could consider the consequences. She knew it was coming eventually, “They want to use what happened on Starkiller against you. They think if I challenge you to a rematch, then you’ll come. They are planning an ambush, and they intend to use me as bait. They would use your desire for revenge to lead you to your death."
Rey expected him to pull away from her, question her loyalty, or leave her to plan a counterattack. She expected anger… derision… panic, perhaps. Kylo was unpredictable, but she expected a reaction. He hummed but was otherwise silent.

Say something! She screamed at him across the bond.

"Revealing critical tactical strategies of the Resistance, Rey? That sounds an awful lot like treason,” he finally said, the deprecating tut of his tongue as irritating as his flippant tone.

"As if you know nothing of treason,” she snapped, abandoning the warmth of his chest to stare in his eyes. The anger flooding through her left her voice quivering. “And that's all you have to say? I'm telling you the truth! They plan to assassinate you! Why are you not taking this seriously?"

I don’t understand, everything is serious to you unless it involves your life.

"I'm in a position of power. The list of those desiring to assassinate me is a very, very long one. My own general would kill me if given the chance. I think you'd be hard-pressed to find someone who doesn't want to kill me,” he replied impassively. “I knew the consequences when I made my choice.”

“But they would use me to do it.” She gripped onto him tighter, pleading with him to care. His hand found the scar on her arm, and his gaze shifted to the old wound she had gained in the throne room. He seemed to have completely forgotten about the current topic. Of all the reactions she had expected, indifference was not one of them. “Ben!”

“Considering you are the only other Force-user in this war and you have a history of defeating me in combat, I think it is a reasonable decision,” he rationalized, still not looking up at her as he studied the scar. It was as if they were speaking of the efficacy of mag-pulse warheads versus proton torpedoes, and not his potential assassination.

Her pulse was pounding in her ears, each beat like a second, counting down until every choice they had ever made coalesced into a crescendo of destiny; a destiny that was fast approaching. "Well, do you want to know how they plan to do it, at least?"

"No."
"Why?"

"I like surprises," Kylo said bemusedly, distracted by tracing the pattern of the old wound. She rolled her eyes at his ironically laissez-faire attitude.

She sighed in irritation. “No, you don’t.”

“Do you know that your scar looks like two hands touching?” he interrupted with intended levity, signaling the conclusion of his side of that conversation.

"Don't say another word, or so help me, Ben, I'll strangle you right now with my bare hands. This is serious! You need to know! I can’t stand by, I can’t let you die, but I need your help! Their plan is already in motion!” Her voice was louder and more fearful than she had anticipated. Rey searched his eyes for reassurance, but his mind was somewhere else. The smirk that was twitching on his lips revealed his thoughts were nothing of consequence.

After a moment of heavy silence, she'd had enough. “Ben, for Force sake, say something.”

It was clear he was still not taking the conversation seriously as he avoided her stare, rolling a lock of her hair between his fingers. “Can I?”

“Can you what?”

“Say something,” he said. “You told me not to say another word or you would strangle me with your bare hands... because you want my help in preventing my death. I have to admit, that's an interesting method.” As she exhaled slowly in irritation, she regretted every single time she was annoyed by his brooding silence. “Although I would like to point out you could easily strangle me without your bare hands, considering you have access to the Force.”

“This is not funny!” Rey never thought those were words she would ever say to him. His father, perhaps, but not him. It was just proof there was still Solo in there somewhere. She grasped his face in her hands and forced her fear into the bond. “Please.”

Kylo sighed heavily in surrender.
“Why would you tell me this, Rey?” he whispered, trailing his finger down her arm. She closed her eyes, the frustration fading as she melted into his touch. “Why do you desire so strongly to save my life?”

“I...” Rey considered the many different reasons she had convinced herself why she needed to commit treason for this man; why she would travel across the galaxy for him, carry on in secret, put herself in danger, and lie in bed wrapped in his arms. None of the reasons were true enough. She knew if she was to continue to ask for his honesty, it was time for her to be honest with him. And herself.

“You are important to me too,” she said, “and not just because I want you to turn. We’re bonded; that means something.” His eyes narrowed as he peered into hers, reading her soul for the truth. “I won’t betray the Resistance, but I cannot allow them to kill you.”

Kylo pulled her closer to him. She closed her eyes as she leaned her forehead against his chest. "There are worse things you could do to me, trust me."

"Such as?"

"Such as making me live in a galaxy without you."

Rey didn’t know exactly what Kylo had meant by those words, but something deep inside her told her there was no going back. One thing she knew for sure, there was no denying his intentions anymore. He cared. They had both danced around their blossoming emotions, but he had vocalized the truth in her traitorous heart. Rey could not deny that they were both traveling down a dangerous road...and fast. She had pretended she was still teetering on the edge of this star-crossed, irreversible chasm of fate, but she had already fallen; and to her alarm, and relief, so had he.

"I'm not going anywhere...well, until the Force takes me back to the Resistance again." Rey smiled. She wrapped her arms around his back and breathed in the scent of his chest. Everything about him was intoxicating. As long as she stayed in his arms, then everything would be okay. She was safe. She was wanted. She was not alone.

It was just a lost boy and a broken girl wrapped in the warmth of their bond. Nothing else mattered, like the moment in the hut on Ahch-To. Just as it had been in the hut, however, their perfect bubble could not last; because it wasn't only "Ben and Rey," as desperately as she wanted it to be.
He buried his face in her hair. "I wish... I could hold you like this forever," he whispered.

"But... you can't?"

Kylo squeezed her tighter.

"No," he breathed.

That one syllable was enough to drop the entire galaxy out from underneath her. She was falling, her stomach turning with the weightlessness... but this feeling wasn't warm or flighty. It was terrifying and sickening. She didn't want him to ever let go, but she needed to know where he stood.

_You couldn't hold me like this and still want power more than me, could you?_

"So what happens now?" Rey wanted more than anything for him to just do what she knew in her heart he would do. Turn. Come back with her, so they could be together. She imagined he could hold her in his arms every night as the rest of the galaxy melted away.

"I don't know," he answered. It was honest. Kylo could have placated her. He could have whispered false promises to keep her there in his embrace, but he didn't. It struck her then, that no matter what evil this man did around him, he would be honest with her.

She pulled back in his arms and stared into his eyes. He pressed his lips together and swallowed. She recognized the way he chewed his words when his emotions threatened to expose him as vulnerable. As she felt him pulling away in the bond, her thoughts flashed back to the throne room.

"Rey..." The way he breathed her name was both a plea and a warning. She craved to melt further into his strong arms, but the look in his eyes was breaking her heart. He didn't say anything, but he didn't have to. She didn't want to know, but she knew.

_He's not going to leave the First Order._
Rey sat up as bile rose in her throat. "What is your plan here, Ben? You go back to destroying planets and trying to kill everyone I care about, and I go back to my friends who are plotting ways to assassinate you?" Her voice shook as she begged him to come to his senses, for him to choose her.

Kylo rolled onto his back and covered his eyes with his fists. "What would you have me do?" Her heart beat wildly. This was it. This was her moment to get through to him, this was her chance.

_I have to save him._

"Leave! Right now, Ben! We can be together like I saw that night when we touched hands. We're meant to be more than enemies across the galaxy. You can come to fight with the Resistance. You and I would be unstoppable against the First Order! You can come back to the light, and everything will be okay!" She pleaded with him desperately.

Kylo dropped his hands from his face and turned toward her. The moment in the throne room when she begged him to save her friends replayed in her mind. The pounding of her heart was deafening just as it had been there. She needed him to turn. He _had_ to turn. She had to save him.

_Please, Ben._

He was not Ben, however. And Kylo was not Kylo without his streak of total unpredictability. He intently searched her eyes for something, and when he didn't find it, he sat up and started... laughing. It was dark and tormented, but it was a laugh nonetheless. Confusion flooded through her as she had never seen the man truly smile let alone laugh and he chose right then – as she begged him to come back – to do it. She felt the anger burn in her chest.

"What could possibly be funny right now, Ben?" she growled indignantly through clenched teeth.

"Forgive me, Rey... “ Kylo cleared his throat to suppress his laughter. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to be more than an enemy to you. I don't understand what changed, but... saying I can leave the Order and join the Resistance? That’s incredibly naïve, sweetheart. Think about it. If I defect from the First Order, it's abandonment, if I go to the Resistance, it’s high treason. Any ship I take to get to you will be tracked, followed and promptly shot down if they have no strategic forethought. Or, if they were resourceful, they would track me right to you and eliminate the entire Resistance right then and there. If I leave the First Order, it is a death sentence… for both of us.”
In battle, he would fight even with all the odds stacked against him, but now he just gives up so easily. I'm not ready to give up that easily, Ben.

"Then I'll come get you. I went to you before, this time I'll bring you back with me!"

Please, Ben, don't give up on this.

"No, you need to stay there. It's too dangerous for you to be flying around the galaxy right now. And you had some help in surviving the last attempt to turn me, remember? But even if you did succeed, what's your plan? Bring me back to the Resistance? The ones you said yourself are plotting to assassinate me? Do you honestly think I can just walk into your base and your friends will take me at my word and just... absolve me of all my perceived crimes? I am an enemy of the Resistance, Rey. I am worth more to them tortured for information and then dead. Is that what you want?"

“They will protect you, I know it. We're a family. You can have a home here.” Her eyes were pleading with him to try. “Your family may have broken you, but it is not too late to make your own family.”

Kylo parted his lips to say something but thought better of it. He chewed his lip for a moment as he considered his words carefully. “You live in ignorance, Rey…” he began, and she glared at him, her brows furrowed in chagrin.

That is what you decided to go with?

“It's not your fault. You spent your entire life alone, learned to trust and rely on no one, and then you were thrust into this war. On your world, it was clear cut – everyone was out for themselves; only families cared for each other. So when the Resistance took you in like family, something you never had, you didn't stop to think about their motivations and intentions.”

“You’re right,” she said, the anger raw in her voice. “I never had a family, but whose fault is that?”

“I’m sorry.” His expression didn’t change, but his emotions over the bond did. She could feel the truth over their connection. He was sorry, but not because he did it.

“Why?” she asked, watching his reaction carefully. “I know it wasn’t you.” His stare swiftly found
interest above him again, hiding his emotions from her.

*Why did you lie and tell me you killed them? What did I see in your memory?*

He didn’t deny it. “None of that changes that the motivations of your new family are not what you think they are, Rey.”

“And what are *your* motivations, Ben?”

“Right now, that is more for the First Order to fear than you.” Rey studied him for an answer to his cryptic words, but his eyes had still not returned to hers.

“Is that true? Does the First Order have more to fear from you than the Resistance? Or do you still plan on killing the Resistance if you find them?”

“If I find them?” his voice was light with humor. “If I want the Resistance dead, I know where they are.”

“Why haven't you come for them?”

He finally met her stare, tilting his head, confounded that she would ask something he clearly viewed as obvious. “Because of you.”

“What if I wasn't with them anymore?” she urged, a bloom of hope swelling in her chest. His jaw hardened. There was an edge of irritation, as if he resented her for asking. He wouldn’t answer, but she found her answer in his silence. He hadn’t found the Resistance because they were important to her, and she… was somehow important to him.

*You are in there, Ben.*

“If you're turning on the First Order, and you won't kill the Resistance, then it only makes sense for you to join us. You can turn, you can—”
Anticipating her line of thinking, he cut in, “Listen, Rey, I may be biased, but hear me out. I know you grew up in a troglodytic world, but the Resistance is not a family. It’s a political faction – a rebellion. The people may feel like a family, as long as your views and actions further their cause. The moment your views do not, they will put the needs of the organization over you. The pilot nearly killed you because of a bond with your enemy that you have zero control over. What you are doing here, with me, is a choice; it’s treason. Make no mistake about that.

“It is an offense punishable by death, no matter how close your 'family' is. My mother is no longer there to protect you, and you are a risk. As far as they know, you could be providing me information on their location or tactical plans. They wouldn't be wrong in assuming so. You are Force-sensitive, that is already reason enough to fear you. Their only motivation is to protect the Resistance, and if you interfere with that, you are no longer of use to them. Family or not, they will turn against you.

“But, let's pretend they are your family. What do you think happens if you bring me there? Even if they did not immediately kill or imprison me –which is very, very unlikely– they will not trust me. They have no reason to. And that means they will not trust you. You will lose your family because of your ties to me.”

Rey cried out in frustration. "Then prove they can trust you! Give them all the information willingly! If you help them dismantle the First Order, they will have no choice but to see what I see in you!" She imagined Kylo and Poe sitting across the table from one another, negotiating an end to the war. It ignited more hope in her aching heart.

"I can't do that," he said flatly.

"You can't or you won't?"

His dark eyes burned unyielding into hers. "I won't."

"Why?" Tears stuck to her eyelashes as she bit back her sorrow. Rey wanted to run again. She wanted to pretend that if she left for long enough, he would come to his senses. He was grasping onto lies. She would never be able to turn him on her own, she knew that, but she believed Ben Solo was in there, fighting against the years of gaslighting and brainwashing to do the right thing. He needed help, and she would fight with him. It would hurt to stay and fight when all she wanted was for him to turn. He had changed since she left him in the throne room; although Snoke was no longer in his head, the damage had been done. He needed the voice of reason, that was why the Force had brought her to him. She only hoped he found his own voice in the end.
When he spoke again, she prepared herself for the battle for Ben Solo. "I know I have not been loyal to the Order, but you must realize that all my treachery has been out of a necessity to keep you safe. There is still a part of me who will not betray the cause I sacrificed so much for."

“We as beings are naturally prone to chaos,” he continued. “It was the task of the New Republic, and now the First Order to eliminate chaos, instability, and disorder. It is the task of the First Order to save us from ourselves. This is much bigger than you or me, Rey; civilization is dependent upon the rule of law. Order promotes stability, and stability promotes progress. Progress was achieved through order under the rule of the Empire... but the stability was reduced to anarchy and chaos by the Rebellion. Instead of establishing order and stability, and promoting the progress of the civilizations they governed, the New Republic was gripped by the same disorder and weakness intrinsic to the Rebellion and now, in turn, the Resistance. The First Order will bring progress back to a galaxy gripped by chaos. The anarchy created by the Resistance is everything that is wrong for civilization. Can you not see that?"

In seconds he had transformed again. This was not the fierce warlord of Starkiller. This was not the soft-hearted son of a smuggler on Ahch-To. This was not the emotionally stunted cur of a monster's war machine on the Supremacy. This was the Supreme Leader. Her emotions warred between pride in his strength as a leader and disappointment that perhaps he was not as lost as she had assumed. She had seen Kylo slip into his verbose political façade before, but never like this. He was his mother's son, whether he liked to admit it or not, and she was not equipped to engage him in this arena. Rey, however, was never one to surrender, even when the odds were stacked against her.

"You may be well versed in politics," Rey's voice trembled, "But I know that violence and ruling with an iron fist is not what is best for the galaxy. Destroying entire systems is not what is best for this galaxy! It's mass murder! The New Republic served the people! You control them!"

“The republic you revere condemned you to a childhood of slavery!” Kylo sneered. “How is what I am doing worse than that?"

I was not a slave!

Rey shuddered in resentment but swallowed her retort. She waited, knowing the silence was when Kylo would usually be lost to his thoughts. He had promised to speak those thoughts that typically filled the void between them; so she quietly studied him, seconds stretching into minutes, yet she held her tongue in exchange for deeper insight into his head.

Please, Ben, just let me in. I need to understand, she begged him across the bond.
His tone softened as he conceded defeat and finally continued. “Do you want to know why the New Republic failed? Corruption had poisoned the highest levels of the Senate. It was unable to properly govern under the continual deadlocks and infighting. My mother wanted to change that and became a candidate for First Senator. Had she won, the First Order would never have had the opportunity to become a viable threat. Perhaps she would have done what I am trying to do, perhaps I would have followed her path after I failed at becoming a Jedi. But she never had the chance to make the changes necessary to save the New Republic. She had many enemies, including Lady Carise Sindian, who was a secret member of the First Order. She discovered my mother's parentage, but it was my mother's closest political ally Ransolm Casterfo who betrayed her and exposed her as the secret daughter of Vader. She would have been the most qualified First Senator, but revenge and the self-serving desires of political foes never spared a thought to what was best for the galaxy. That is the truth of the New Republic.

“I was never involved in the military hierarchy here, I never had an interest in the throne. But when I stared at Snoke's body, I remembered why the First Order was necessary. It was why I couldn't leave. I realized I can make a difference in a position of power, because I know the weaknesses of the Jedi Order, New Republic, Empire, and First Order. I can save the galaxy, because I will not placate the desires of the rulers of civilizations in exchange for the greater good. I will not be a slave to what the people want, but instead fight for what they need, because I cannot be bought.”

“But Ben, one person cannot possibly know what the civilizations of the galaxy need,” she argued. “We need law, yes, and passionate people like you to establish a Republic that does work. We need politicians like your mother who put the people first. But the First Order is just as self-serving as the New Republic was. You still have officers and generals who undermine your vision. Nothing will change! It is too much power for one person to possess! You killed all those people on Concordia. You did it, not for the good of the galaxy, but to protect one person. You killed women and children without trial or sentencing. You don't have to become the monster that everyone feared that you would be. You don't have to take this path.”

"Do you know what my mother said?" His demeanor had changed, the imperious tone subsided to a pensive tenderness, “I would rather be a monster that believes in something, that would sacrifice everything to make the galaxy better, than be someone who sits on the sidelines and watches as if it has no consequences to them.' Those were my mother's words, Rey, but I live by them. We may have ended up with different perspectives on how to resolve this, but my mother and I took a stand to fight for the betterment of this galaxy. We are not the type to remain complacent as the galaxy suffers around us. It's easy to sit idle and do nothing.”

“But it's also easy to be the hero,” he continued with a vehemence that implied conviction, not mechanical recitation. His views were deluded, but they were not formed solely by Snoke’s influence. “It requires little sacrifice. Civilizations are fickle. Legends never die, but the people who lived to witness those legends do. Civilizations change, and with them the collective perspective. If legends last long enough... the heroes will see themselves become the villains.”

“Like Luke and my mother. His greatest contribution to history was his exploitation of the
sentimental weakness of his father. Hers was destroying an empire. There are arguably no two other people who have sacrificed more for the good of the galaxy. But time was not kind to their legacies. Civilians of the galaxy turned on them, because they couldn’t escape the truth that was their family. Perhaps in the future, their achievements will be forgotten, and history will instead remember their roles in the creation of Kylo Ren as their greatest contribution.”

Rey shook her head, but Kylo persisted. “Details and sentiments are forgotten over time. Morality and ethics become muddled. Righteousness becomes the judgment of the narrator. So whether right now, in this time, the group of anarchists you call the Resistance view me as the enemy is inconsequential. If I have to be the one they call evil to save this galaxy from itself, then that is a sacrifice I'm willing to make.”

"Please, Ben, I know you are trying to be the change the galaxy needs. You saw what the New Republic did to your mother, and you want to create a government that serves the people and addresses the true issues that civilizations face. I understand that. Law is necessary and order is important. You could still do good, but you don’t need to be the enemy of the people to save them. The First Order only cares about domination. That won’t save this galaxy, giving the power back to people will. You can still make a difference – just not this way, not with them." She begged him to see the truth, but he believed his own lies.

Kylo was so calm... so certain... so rational. Rey found herself struggling, again, to debate with him, because he had a strong mastery over the manipulation of an argument. She used emotion to sway him, but he used derisive logic misrepresented as fact. Arguing with him was dangerous, because, as misguided as his beliefs were, she could find truth, reason, and validity behind what he said.

"I don't know what you want from me, Rey. I’ve sacrificed everything for the First Order, and I finally have a chance to make a difference. You expect me to give it all up and walk away. For what?"

For me, Ben.

Naturally, he heard her in her moment of vulnerability. The significance of what she said seemed to escape him in his agitation, however. “But you wouldn’t do the same for me. You’ve fought for the Resistance for days not years, but when I asked you to leave them, you wouldn’t. I’ve committed treason for you and your friends; when will it ever be enough?”

“This isn't about what I need from you,” she said, fearing that his defenses had become impenetrable. “This about saving you! It will never be enough until you are free from the First Order.”
“And what do you think happens to you all if I leave?” he asked, his tone darkening. “It is easy for you to sit there and condemn me for staying here, but I am the only one standing between the First Order and the Resistance, don't you see that? If you want to help me, then join me here, we can destroy everything that is wrong with the galaxy. Together.”

No, not this.

The anger inside her seethed. She didn’t argue with him in the throne room, because she hadn’t trusted him to let her go. But there was nothing he could do over the bond, so she would make him answer for it now. Rey wanted to shake him, snap him back to reality, make him see how wrong he was.

"No, Ben! Don’t go down this path again! Don’t be the man who killed Snoke for his throne! Don’t be the man who chose power over me!"

"I killed Snoke to protect you!" he seethed. “I knew I had to kill him when I saw that vision in the hut. You put yourself at risk and forced my hand by showing up on the Supremacy! Why would you come to me? I walked into that throne room with no plan, no strategy, nothing... against the most powerful being in the galaxy. You are lucky it turned out the way it did! If he wanted to kill you himself, I would have been powerless to stop him! I trusted in the Force like I never have, had to watch him torture you. I couldn’t react at all, or he would have known everything. I waited for the moment it would guide me to save you, because I knew the Force may abandon me, but it would never abandon you. It may have worked, but that could have ended a million other ways, most of them in your death.”

He paused as he sucked in agitated breaths. “Sometimes, Rey, you can be frustratingly naïve. If I wanted to choose power over you, then I would have killed you and waited to overthrow Snoke until after I had the map to Skywalker, which died with him! I chose you over the only thing that had mattered to me for years! I didn’t choose power over you! I asked you to share it with me! I am nothing without the First Order. I offered you everything, and you tried to kill me.”

His words were sharp and cutting, but his words also revealed a deep underlying wound. Even after witnessing his memories, she believed he had killed Snoke for power. It made sense that he also wanted power because he believed he could create something new, something better. After spending his entire life defending himself, he would finally have the power. What she hadn’t considered was perhaps his desire to take the throne was a consequence of killing Snoke and not the catalyst. That would mean he did kill his master for her, and he believed she wanted to kill him for it.
“I didn’t try to kill you, Ben. If I wanted to, I would have when you were unconscious. I could have done it when I checked to make sure you were okay,” she said, blinking away tears. “And you did not offer me everything, not what I wanted. You only offered me your ambition.”

His jaw clenched as the betrayal burned in his eyes. His sorrow did not stream down his cheeks, but it did flood his voice. “What do you want from me then! I begged you. I offered you the galaxy! Everything I have!”

"I didn’t want the galaxy, Ben; I wanted you!"

He was quiet for a moment as he studied her, but it still wasn’t enough to fight through the darkness. "This is me," he said, the betrayal fading to regret in his eyes.

She may have believed him once, but she had seen everything in his mind. She knew the truth. "No, I don't believe that. I know who you are. We both know who you truly are. And you are not a Sith. You are not Snoke. You are not some master of darkness."

Kylo exhaled slowly. “You’re right, I am not a master of darkness; I am its prisoner.” He worked his jaw, the foul taste of those words in his mouth evident in the repulsed expression that hardened his features. “I did not choose the darkness; the darkness chose me. It’s too late. It’s always been too late. My fall to darkness was inevitable. It was fate’s design. There will always be darkness, Rey. That is what the Jedi never understood. There would be no light without it. I cannot deny the darkness because it is a part of me; it always has been. I was destined for this path before I was even born…” His eyes lost their focus as he absently stared beyond her, his thoughts were lost to the torment of his mind.

“No, that’s not true,” she grabbed his clenched fists to force him to look at her, but his eyes remained distant. “It is never too late to make the right choice, Ben – no matter what darkness is inside you, or torture you suffered through. You can still make the choice to be saved. I’ll help you save yourself from the darkness.”

Her words snapped his eyes back to hers. Had they been capable of lighting her on fire, she would have ignited under his gaze. “Is this all I am to you... a fight for my soul? Am I just some conquest to be won? Because that is all I ever have been to anyone.”

“Is my worthiness in your eyes dependent upon whether I’ve embraced the light completely, denying who I truly am?” His teeth were clenched in a resentment that crashed through their bond. “Because I can never be what you want me to be.”
“Does it matter what I want? Because I don’t want to be what everyone has tried to make me be my entire life, Rey.”

She chewed her lip with worry. This was infinitely more complicated than she had originally anticipated. She considered for a moment if she had been wrong. Was she trying to make him someone he wasn’t? Was she not meant to help him save himself? If that was true, why had the Force bonded them?

“I’m fighting for you, because I know that the man that you pretend to be is not who you are. Ben, if you continue down this path, Kylo Ren will die, either by your side or mine. Don’t let Ben Solo be another casualty of Kylo Ren. I don’t want to lose Ben Solo. Is it so wrong to fight for someone I care for?”

His eyes studied hers carefully. “I thought I was impossible to care for,” he replied bitterly, echoing her words.

“When you act like Kylo Ren you are!”

Rey immediately regretted her impulsive reaction.

His anger sparked in the bond like a rekindled ember. “This right here...” he shouted, pointing to his chest, “This is Kylo Ren. Or Ben Solo. Or whatever you want to call me. I’m not two different people living in one man’s body! You seem to have this idea that everything I have done that you hate was Kylo, and everything I have done that you agree with is this so-called Ben. It’s not. It was all me, no matter what name you use. There will never be a day when Kylo Ren miraculously disappears. Those actions that you hate are still mine. Pretending that there is some perfect man trapped inside me – only needing to be freed – is delusional. There are not two Reys – the one that tried to kill me and the one here in my arms. That was all you, and this is all me. It’s easy to care for the man I am when we are alone but that means also caring for the Supreme Leader who killed his own father. Because I am both, Rey. This is all me!”

“Kylo Ren is not who you are. It is the mask you hide behind,” she said categorically. “You can be Ben Solo again. It is not too late.”

“Rey, can you be the person you were before your parents abandoned you? Or even the person you were before you left Jakku? The person you were before Han died? Or before you met Luke?”
“No, but I wouldn't want to be that person again. I would never go back to who I was in the past because everything that happened made me who I am, and I am proud of who I am,” she said, “But, Ben – murder, darkness, galactic domination – that isn't you. It’s what you’ve been led to believe you are.”

“If you understand why you could never be that person again, then you understand why I cannot be Ben Solo.”

“No. Ben Solo is the man you truly are, you just don't see it like I do. You can still come home.” Kylo opened his mouth to react in anger, but stopped himself. He was quiet for a moment before speaking again.

“I'm not coming home,” he whispered, not unkindly. Rey hiccuped a sob as her heart clenched. He hesitated before swiping his thumb gently across her cheek, catching her tear. “My life was never meant to last long, sweetheart. It is the fate of most Jedi and Sith who do not go into exile. And I will not hide from my destiny. My first memory is a droid trying to murder me, I do not fool myself into believing that my last will be old, warm in my bed, surrounded by family. My parents and grandparents, more worthy people than me, were not granted such a kind fate. Why would I? When I say Ben Solo is gone, it is not out of stubborn defiance. That name belongs to a man of the past, a man before Snoke. That man cannot return without rewriting the past.”

“I know everything changed when you witnessed those memories,” he continued softly. “I wish you never did. Because now you have hope for a man that I cannot be anymore. Even if I retook the name of that man, I will only disappoint you. I will never be him. That man died at Luke's hand. And I have made choices that have changed who I am. Ben Solo and Kylo Ren are just names, yes, but the legacy attached to those names are inherently different. What I have done as Kylo Ren is a legacy I will never escape. The galaxy will never see me as anything other than a monster. The man in my memories that you have compassion for, he’s gone, Rey. All that is left is me.” By the time he had finished, Rey was silently sobbing. She shook her head in denial, but the truth of his words lay heavy on her chest.

Kylo was right; she knew the man in his memories was gone. He carried burdens that had left scars deeper than the physical ones that marred his body. And just as the scar bisecting his cheek could not be removed to reveal the face that had been before, neither could his experiences and choices be taken back to reveal the man he could have become.

“But Kylo Ren is not real,” she said. “And maybe you can’t be who you once were, but that doesn’t mean that you can't be the person I see inside. You have already committed treason for the Resistance. You know what the First Order is doing is wrong. You don't have to be who you used to be to come home. The sacrifices you made for Snoke were a lie, there is no reason to stay.
Please, I don't want to lose you.”

He smiled wanly, but it didn’t counter the anguish in his eyes. “If I can’t convince you to join the First Order, then I will have to accept that.” His voice was even and controlled again. “You need to accept that I can’t and won’t join the Resistance. There is no path without consequence and no ending where either of us join the other side. That's the reality. All we have is this.”

“Is that what you’ve decided for us, Ben? And when this ends?” she asked spitefully, rubbing at her eyes with the heels of her hands. “What do we do when we inevitably meet in battle, because your side is trying to kill mine. Do you expect me to fight you?”

“Yes, I do,” he said, his voice adamant as if he wasn’t asking her to consider the unimaginable. “And you will not hesitate. You will kill me, Rey, as you are destined to do.” Kylo tried to reach out for her, to soothe her, but she pulled away.

“I won’t kill you, Ben,” her voice was as pointed as the daggers she was glaring at him. “I can’t.”

“You can,” he insisted. “Promise me, if I ask you to, you will.”

“No, I won’t! I don’t care what you say, I will never do that. We can run away, Ben. We can forget the First Order and the Resistance.”

"Rey, stop. You don't want to run away.” His voice was firm and unyielding as if she had no opinion on the matter. “You would never see anyone in the Resistance again. They are your family. You would never have a home because we would always be running. We would be hunted by the First Order, the Resistance, bounty hunters, you name it. Or you would be forced to a life of meaninglessness isolated on an uninhabited planet like you were on Jakku. You would give up your life for what? To save me? No Rey, I couldn't do that to you. You would resent me for the rest of your life.”

“Ben, my life would not be meaningless,” she said. “We can continue the Jedi Order and start our own Jedi temple! I have Luke's books!”

“We can't. It’s a wishful dream,” he murmured. His eyes were soft but unwavering. “The Jedi Order needs to die. You don’t know it like I do. Their legacy is failure. I will end the weakness that is the Jedi Order; there is nothing you can do to change that.”
“Then just come with me, Ben, please. Anywhere,” she begged. “When you are away from the First Order, you'll see… you'll see what I see in you. We can come back when you’re – ”

“You say you want to go with me, but you don't want me. You want who you think I was, you want the aspiring Jedi Knight. You want my uncle… or my father. I could never be what you want me to be, because you won’t accept me for who I am. I am Kylo Ren, the Supreme Leader of the First Order. I will always have darkness in me.” His tone was final, and there was a sharpness to it. Rey wondered if the anger was more directed at her or himself. “This is no different than holding onto hope for your parents all those years. You’re holding onto ghosts.”

“I’ve seen your nightmares, Ben,” she sniffled. “I’m not the one holding onto ghosts.”

*He does these horrible things, and I thought he just doesn't care that he’s wrong, but that's not it. He does these horrible things and convinces himself that he’s right. He doesn't see this as evil. He doesn't see himself as wrong. He truly believes in what he is saying... which is terrifying. Ben is intelligent, logical and passionate, and his argument is valid. It is not necessarily his beliefs that are wrong; it’s the method he feels is his only choice in applying them. He's not a monster. He's just too radicalized to see his own ideology for what it truly is. How do I help save a man when he doesn't know he needs to be saved?*

"I know who you are, Ben Solo, even if you refuse to see it.”

“I don’t think I was ever Ben Solo. I was told how lucky I was to be me, and I was a monster if I didn’t see it that way. But I wasn’t me. I was Captain Solo and Senator Organa’s son, Master Luke Skywalker’s nephew, Ben Kenobi’s namesake, Darth Vader’s grandson. That is all I’ve ever been to anyone until I became Kylo Ren.”

“But you can’t run from your past,” she said. “You can kill your father, your mother, Luke, Snoke, Jacen, me…everyone who has ever betrayed you, but that won’t erase the scars. You can’t destroy what they did. You can’t destroy the pain it caused. All you will do is burden yourself with more suffering. You’re trapped in the past, Ben.”

“The past is trapped in me, Rey,” he replied softly. “It always has been.”

“I want to pretend that I don’t know how you got here, Ben. But I saw everything. I understand how you became Kylo Ren. And honestly, I can’t blame you, because we’re not so different. You shouldn’t have had to go through the loneliness and abandonment and betrayal that you went through. But you can’t change what happened in the past. You can only change what happens now. Those people aren’t here now. I am. You have to let go of the anger and resentment. Let go. Let
the past go. That’s the only way you can be who you’re meant to be – Ben Solo.”

His eyes flashed in humor as he recognized his words on her lips, but it was fleeting. A shadow darkened his features. “Ben Solo is dead.”

“No, Ben Solo is not dead,” she whispered. “I see him in you; when you saved me, when you fought by my side, when you touched my hand… You asked me why I didn’t take your hand. I did. In the hut, I took Ben’s hand. I came halfway across the galaxy for Ben. For you. That’s the man I want. Offer me Ben’s hand again and I’ll take it.”

Kylo stared at her for far too long – eyes piercing to the deepest reaches of her soul. She thought he would finally see the truth, but he sighed instead, and then glanced away. “If only it were that simple.”

“It has to be that simple, we need your help,” she argued. “You are the galaxy’s last hope, Ben.”

Kylo huffed a soft chuckle. “No, Rey. You are.” Her lips parted in awe as his words settled in the bond between them. She searched his eyes, and his brow furrowed slightly. There was uncertainty in them as if he feared he had said something wrong.

“I think that is one of the nicest things you have ever said to me,” she whispered, “But I don’t want to be the last hope.”

His smile was remorseful. “Neither do I.”

Rey was too discouraged to continue. She saw no point in trying to convince him of something so ingrained that it had become a part of him. Tears rolled down her cheeks and her body shook uncontrollably. She lowered her eyes, refusing to look at him. Remorse and sorrow trickled into the bond.

*I know what happened to you, I know how you ended up here. So why am I so... disappointed? I have the answers to your past, but they bring me no closer to changing your future. I don’t know what I expect from you. I know I’m asking for unattainable things. But what else would you have me do? Giving up on you would be sentencing you to death. But you have to save yourself, because you have to want to be saved. You’re not ready yet. I want to keep waiting, but we’re running out of time.*
“Please don't hate me for being honest, Rey,” Kylo whispered. “You make me want to be someone I wish I could be, even though I know I can’t.”

She raised her eyes to his. “I don't hate you, Ben,” she said softly, “But do you know how much it hurts to watch you destroy yourself? For what? The First Order? When has the First Order cared about you beyond what you can do for them?”

“When has anyone cared about me beyond what I can do for them?” he replied.

“I care, Ben.”

Perhaps he did it out of guilt, perhaps he did it to explain what words could not express, or perhaps he realized he had nothing left to give her, but she was overwhelmed with emotion as his mental barriers dropped away.

Rey did not have experience with emotions of those depths and ardency, she couldn't put a name to it, only recognize its familiarity in her own heart. It was an emotion of pure light, and had it not surprised her to feel such light in him, she might have further pondered the meaning of such a strong emotion. It filled her soul with a safe and comforting warmth – a warmth that matched the flickering in his soft brown eyes. She closed her own eyes and basked in his powerful light. It reignited her hope for him after his heartbreaking words.

When she opened her eyes, Kylo cautiously reached for her as if she were a steelpecker in the wastelands of the Jakku desert that would fly away at any moment. She leaned into his broad chest and he hesitantly wrapped his arms around her. *I hate that you do this to me, Ben. How can I be so frustrated with you and yet all I can think about is staying in your arms? The thought of spending the rest of my life across the galaxy from you breaks my heart... but if this is the only way I can be in your arms then I will spend forever waiting for you like this.*

Rey lifted her head off his chest, gaze downcast in disappointment. She sniffled. Kylo put his large hands on either side of her face and wiped her tears with his thumbs. She smiled up at him and searched his eyes. When her stare met his she discovered something new... something dangerous... flash across them. Looking into his eyes felt like the moment of anticipation before she jumped across a large expanse in a Star Destroyer.

She immediately became all too aware that her hands were on his broad, but very bare chest as they leaned into each other on his bed. Her heart fluttered as a different warmth shuddered through her. She couldn’t deny, even in this moment of frustration with him, how attracted she was to him. There was a madness inside her, a tension that eased as the void between them closed, an irrational
temptation luring her to him. She stared at his parted lips with a terrifying desire. The bond pulsed around them as he dipped his head and she tilted hers up to meet him. Her heart rate quickened. He was so close she could feel the warm puff of his heavy breaths on her lips.

*What would happen if I kissed him?*

Rey decided she wanted to find out. But when the Force sparked like electricity as the distance between them closed, leaving a tingle of anticipation on her lips, Kylo's body tensed under her grasp. She would have assumed it was the same nervousness as before, but he pulled away slightly. The bond hardened and her stomach sank. His palm slowly slid from her cheek, moving swiftly and stealthily like a stalking predator. Her eyes followed as his hand reached out with practiced precision. If her eyes hadn’t been following his movements, she would have missed it. The Force spiked and a dark, formidable object was pulled fluently to his hand.

He had summoned his lightsaber.

*Distrust.* The bond was shuddering with distrust. A sickening terror twisted through her stomach.

“Ben, why are you doing this? I don't understand?” Her head snapped back to anxiously search his eyes. His intense gaze did not meet hers as she had expected. He was staring behind her.

That was when Rey felt the other presence in the room.
Chapter End Notes

Mention of violence

Characters speak of past violence and murder
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
"General Hux, the last of the Knights of Ren have arrived. Shall I inform the Supreme Leader?" Lieutenant Mitaka stood patiently waiting for an order, as the general faced away from him, overlooking the complex machine looming in the darkness.

"No, send them to me," he said.
“Sir?”

“I have a special security Holovid to show them, to ensure their loyalty to me.” Without turning, Hux activated the Holovid, moving the projector into view of the officer. The images of Kylo using Luke's lightsaber against Snoke and the following battle with the Praetorian guard flashed in front of them both. "Wait, wait, wait this is my favorite part," he laughed as Rey reached for the lightsaber rather than Kylo's hand.

"Sir, how did you..." Mitaka stammered.

"I had it salvaged from the wreckage of the Supremacy.” With a chuckle, Hux slipped the projector back into his pocket. “He should have known, we have security cams all over our ships, someone is always watching.”

"Sir, this is high treason, should we bring this to the attention of the..."

"All in good time," Hux said, grinning wickedly in the darkness. "But first, Ren must lead us to the girl, the last of the Jedi, and the remnants of the Resistance that he let slip through our grasp. The girl and her band of traitors will be no match for the Knights of Ren. Then I can begin my experimentation with Force Destiny and the power of what dark energy can create. The applications are limitless.”

Hux couldn’t see the Lieutenant, but he could hear the edge of fear in his voice. "Yes, sir."

"And bring me the Rodian bounty hunter, I have a job of collection and live transport for him.” He gestured lazily and then returned his clasped hands behind his back, silently admiring his work. “That is all.”
Chapter End Notes

Threat of violence

Hux threatens another character vaguely
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, at over 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Rey’s fear was not the presence behind her - the presence that was the sole focus of Kylo's attention - but whose side her bondmate would defend when he was forced to choose. Before she witnessed his memories and felt that light inside him, before she better understood his mindset in the throne room, she would have assumed his loyalty was to the First Order. But everything he had done to save both her and her friends from certain death called for her trust in him. She searched for the loyalty in his eyes that would save them both, but his guarded stare remained fixed on the doorway. His energy felt like a coil ready to snap.

He was waiting.

For what? Rey didn't want to know. She imagined his general standing behind her, blaster raised. He would undoubtedly try to kill her. Would the bolts reach across the galaxy? Would Kylo try to protect her? What would they do to him if he did? When she considered it, her fear withered and hope sprouted in its place. She trusted him to protect them both. If they could survive it, this could be the push Kylo needed to leave, even if it was not by choice. If he left, he would be free.

Unfortunately, the reality was far more complicated… and terrifying.

"Rey!" A distant voice echoed around the room. She knew that voice.

His chambers slowly faded as she turned in search of the object of his attention. Kylo was now with her on her temple bed, and Finn was standing in the entryway, a blaster rifle pointed in their direction. His eyes were burning with hatred.

"Do it now! Kill him!" Finn screamed when their eyes locked. Another flicker of distrust radiated in the bond before Kylo slammed his mental barriers shut. Rey glanced back at him, trying to discern his mental state without the aid of the bond, but he did not take his eyes off Finn.

The two men she cared for most would undoubtedly kill each other. It wouldn’t be Kylo’s loyalties that would be tested, but hers. She had no weapon, not in the typical sense, so she used the only weapon she had. She shifted to place herself in the line of fire between them.
Her decision surprised Kylo if the sudden emotions that slipped through his barriers into the bond were any indication. He had been waiting for her to make a move against him, to betray him again, she realized as his distrust faded.

Fear bloomed in its place.

He thumbed the trigger of his lightsaber with one hand and grasped her shoulder protectively with the other. He attempted to drag her backward, most likely behind him, but she remained steadfast in her place on the bed. As long as she was between them, then they were both safe.

Kylo's jaw clenched, but he was otherwise eerily still. He made no move to raise his weapon, but she knew he was carefully analyzing the possibilities. She remembered this silent volatility from the throne room. An explosive Kylo was terrifying, but a calculating Kylo was deadly.

"Ben, please don't hurt him," she whispered.

She heard Kylo's voice inside her mind. *Don't worry about what I'll do, Rey, but what I can't do. I can put raindrops into stasis across the galaxy, but I don't know if I can stop a blaster bolt. The energy required...*

Rey wondered if Finn fired the weapon if it would even hit Kylo. She fired at him on Ahch-To, and it did nothing. But the bond was stronger now. She could hit him with those droid parts. What about the lightsaber? Could he hurt Finn? She would do everything in her power not to find out.

Rey knew she was the only thing standing – sitting – between the two most important people in her life. She needed one of them on her side to prevent bloodshed. When she was forced to choose, she made the unexpected decision that she trusted her enemy bondmate over her best friend. She trusted in him enough to turn her back to Kylo to face Finn.

"I gave you three days, now do what you know needs to be done," he said, voice wavering with fury. She shook her head defiantly, tears flowing down her cheeks as her heart was torn in two directions. "This ends now. If you won't do it, I will. Move, Rey."

She raised her hands in supplication, trying to calm her friend. "Finn...please! Lower the weapon. No one is hurting anyone, okay?"
There was a loud screech and a frenzied ball of black and silver rolled between them. Blue was begging Finn not to hurt his master, but it only agitated Finn further.

“You!” Finn shouted. “I should have known you’d belong to someone like him!”

“Blue, leave, now;” Kylo demanded. His eyes remained fixed on her best friend, even as the droid backed from the room. “Your problem is with me. Don’t talk to the droid again or I’ll make it so you can’t talk.”

Finn was livid. “Move, Rey!”

*Move, Rey.* Kylo's voice echoed in her mind, begging her with a fear she had not witnessed in him often. *I know you can sense his instability in the Force. He may do something unpredictable, I don't want you caught in the crossfire. I... won't hurt him. Trust me. Move.* Kylo was right, Finn was becoming more frenzied, his hands were shaking with emotion as he pointed the weapon, but she knew what would happen if she moved.

*No, Ben. If I move, he will pull that trigger.*

"Rey, move! Can’t you see he’s manipulating you? You heard what Poe said. You know what this guy has done to all of us and will do to all of us. He killed Han, he almost killed me, doesn't that matter to you? Why are you defending this... this monster? Think of the Resistance! You have the chance to take down the Supreme Leader of the First Order right now, all you have to do is move! I... I don't want to hurt you!" Finn's voice cracked with emotion, split between his hatred for Kylo and his fear for her.

"Rey... listen to your friend. Move. I'll be fine, you won't be," Kylo growled. She turned, hearing the anxious tone of his voice, his calculating eyes remained fixed on Finn's movements. She looked back to her friend; his eyes were wild.

*You don't know that, Ben. He could kill you. I'm not moving.*

Finn's chest was heaving, his finger was quivering against the trigger. "It's us or him, Rey, choose!"
"Don't make me choose," she begged, her eyes searching Finn's in an appeal to his good nature. *I'm not moving,* she conveyed with a shake of her head.

Rey had faith that her friend would not shoot through her to kill their enemy, and she had faith that her bondmate would not attempt anything as long as she was in the way. The Force was heavy with anticipation as both men's fingers hovered over their respective triggers. Rey held her hands out between them, but without a weapon, she was helpless to deescalate the situation. They all knew Finn could switch the blaster to stun for his shot or Kylo could use the Force to render her unconscious. If they chose to go through her, they could.

Her skin prickled in a warning in the Force; one of the men had made a decision, though she was powerless to know which one. The chosen action and resulting consequence was all but inevitable. She only had the chance to mentally prepare herself. If Finn fired, she would shove Kylo out of the way and hope she was not caught in the crossfire. If Kylo activated his weapon, she would stand in front of Finn to protect him.

Before she could further plead with either of them, Kylo was the one to make his move. He shoved her off the bed with the Force, slowing her velocity before she slammed into the wall on the opposite side of the room. She was out of the crossfire, but that meant there was no longer a barrier between the men. He slowly shifted to his feet on the other side of the bed. His eyes remained fixed on Finn's as he activated his lightsaber.

She stood swiftly, but she was too far to move between them. “Ben don't!”

*Trust me,* his soothing voice whispered in her mind.

“You aim a weapon in her direction again and I'll kill you, traitor,” Kylo promised, raising his lightsaber.

There was a flash of resolution in Finn’s eyes. The Force rippled around them, it was another warning. She knew Finn had made his choice. He was going to chance his own safety to kill Kylo.

"Stop!" She shouted, analyzing her possible courses of action in the milliseconds before Finn's finger touched the trigger. Finding no other viable option, she chose to further trust in her bondmate. She used the Force to summon the blaster to her own hands. As the weapon jerked away from him, Finn's finger brushed the trigger. An errant bolt blasted from the muzzle in her direction.
“Rey!” Kylo choked, reaching for her in futility, his manipulations of the Force did not reach across the galaxy. But the Force had not abandoned her. Rey surrendered to its guidance as she turned, hissing in pain as the bolt grazed her arm. The blaster rifle crashed to the ground at her feet.

“Rey, I... I didn't mean to,” Finn stammered. She knew that. Finn would never intentionally hurt her. But she had barely a second to recover before Kylo was moving across the room.

“You could have killed her!” Kylo's voice was booming with rage, his weapon raised to strike down her friend. The Force was vibrating with hatred, oppressing them all in a cloud of darkness.

“Ben, stop!”

Her plea fell on deaf ears.

Don't do this! I will never forgive you if you hurt him.

Her bondmate continued toward her only family with his weapon raised in a promise.

Please, Ben! I love him!

Her admission stalled him mid-step. He tilted his head over his shoulder to stare at her with eyes burning in... something fierce, something that Rey could have easily mistaken for betrayal.

You asked me to trust you. I’m trusting you. Please don't hurt him.

His jaw clenched as a tremor shivered down his body. That was the only warning she had before he snapped.

Spinning on his heels, Kylo cried out in a guttural howl. His lightsaber crackled brightly as it connected with, what was likely, an electric panel on his side of the bond. Sparks flared into the air around him. He remained facing away from her, his body shuddering with heavy breaths.
You love him? his voice rasped across their connection.

Of course, she did. It was a peculiar fact to focus on, especially after she admitted to trusting him, but she hoped it was enough to arrest his violent response.

Yes, he’s my first friend, my best friend. Please don’t hurt him.

What is it, Rey? Are you just friends or do you love him?

‘Just friends?’ Ben, friendship isn’t a consolation prize.

I didn’t mean –

To answer your question – both. He’s my family. The brother I never had. And I love him. Don’t take him away from me.

There was a pause as her words settled over the bond. Slowly, his fury flickered to embers. Kylo’s eyes met hers. They were still dark with fury, but he didn’t move to attack her friend. It was good enough for the moment.

“You see, Rey?” Finn shouted, gesturing to the damage Kylo had wrought with his temper. “He's dangerous!”

Kylo's voice was a low growl. “I'll show you dangerous.”

“And he could have done much worse if he wanted to! Just go, Finn!” she shouted back.

Finn's eyes were wide in disbelief. His eyes flashed to the weapon abandoned at her feet, and the Force bristled in a warning. Holding her friend's stare, she kicked the blaster behind her, hoping it would convince him to abandon whatever desperate thoughts were clouding his judgment.

“I’m not leaving you with him, Rey.”
She loved her friend, but he was foolish to face Kylo with a solitary blaster and no element of surprise. Finn refused to go anywhere. His glare returned to her bondmate and his deadly crimson lightsaber. Her best friend was prepared to face his destiny protecting her. Kylo was staring right back, prepared to seek revenge for his perceived threat upon her life.

“Ben...”

_He could have killed you!_ he roared over their bond.

_But he didn't._

_But he could have. And I would have been powerless to stop it._ Even through their connection, his voice was strained with emotion.

_It's tearing me apart Ben– the two people I care about most are trying to kill each other. Please, don't make me choose._

Kylo huffed a breath, before tearing his eyes away from Finn to meet hers.

_Please._

With clear reluctance, he deactivated the weapon and tossed it behind him on the bed, begrudgingly holding his hands up to placate them both. “Thank you,” she mouthed silently at her bondmate. His jaw worked in clear irritation, but Kylo managed a stiff nod.

Rey sighed in relief. She couldn't help but smile across the room at her bondmate. She had trusted him, and he had kept his word. His chest was still heaving in agitation, but he was staring at her with that look again. The look from the throne room. It set fire to her skin, and she nearly forgot they were not alone.

"I guess you made your choice, Rey," Finn whispered resentfully from the entryway, fracturing the moment. He glanced back and forth between them, searching for an answer Rey feared he would find. She closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to see the betrayal in his.
I didn't choose him, Finn. I did everything I could to keep both of you safe. I don't want to choose. Why can't you see that?

When she opened her eyes, Finn was gone. It was likely for the best; he wouldn’t listen to anything she had to say in his current condition. Finn cared, he wanted to protect her, but he was blinded in his anger and needed time to cool off. In the morning, she would find him before they left for Dantooine. He knew her secret now; she had no intention of taking part in the plan to ambush her bondmate. Once the shock had worn off, she could explain what Kylo meant to her. If the Supreme Leader could be reasoned with when a lightsaber burned in his palm and bloodlust burned in his eyes, then there was no reason to believe that Finn couldn’t come to a similar understanding. He was her best friend; he would help her find a way to explain it to the others. They could find another way to stop the First Order. Everything would be okay.

Rey expected Kylo to be gone as well, jolted back to his side of the galaxy. But when she turned, he was sitting on the bed, his fists clenched. She sat down next to him, and the room slowly faded back into his chambers. He looked as exhausted as she felt.

“I'm...” sorry. The word sorry sounded trite. She let her apology fall away, leaning into him instead. He briefly examined her wound before wrapping his arms around her. They collapsed back onto the bed together. She was thankful the Force hadn't sent him away yet, she wanted a few more stolen moments to lie in his arms, her face pressed against his heated chest.

"That... right... there... is why this won’t go the way you want, Rey,” he murmured, his body still trembling from adrenaline wearing off.

I know, her mind screamed, but her heart didn’t agree. What was the truth? Finn’s reaction was everything Kylo had told her to expect, but she still knew her friend better than he did. There was still a chance that it would go the way she wanted.

Everything will be okay, Ben, you’ll see.
Chapter End Notes

Threat of Violence

Two characters threaten to injure/kill other characters
UPDATE: I've posted about half of Part 2 and will post the second half before opening day (hopefully). I am forever grateful that the amazing and talented Meauxwalk had offered to help beta so we could get this out on time. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

PART 2

It is 100 percent finished, but because I have no beta, editing is sloooow. Part one editing took me well over two months. I will edit as much as I can by December and then post the rest unedited. As of right now, part two is much larger with 118 chapters, which will likely climb as I added about ten chapters to part one while uploading due to maximum word constraints on chapters. As I've
stated before, it is well over 700,000 words and it is a slow burn. Thankfully the galactic idiots are friends now, and their relationship will progress - and be tested - in part two. Buckle up for the angst!
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Kylo felt cold. It was a bone-numbing cold, and he had felt it once before on Starkiller. There was the pull of the Force around him, but his senses weren’t heightened as they should have been. Distantly, Kylo knew he was still safe in bed, asleep, but this felt too real to be a dream. At first, he believed it was a memory of Starkiller, when he collapsed into the snow. But his face didn’t burn as it had then. In fact, *nothing* hurt. Kylo looked up to find one of his Knights standing over him in the snow. There was something off about the Knight’s posture, something *threatening*. Reaching into the Force, he recognized the familiar energy.
Jacen.

When he sensed a warning in the Force, Kylo pushed himself to his feet and ignited his lightsaber. He barely lifted his blade to meet Jacen’s swift strike. His body, however, didn’t respond with the strength and power he was accustomed to. He found himself on the defensive. With every block and parry, he grew weaker. He could barely stand. Groaning through gritted teeth, he struggled against Jacen’s wrath. His arms shook as the weakness overwhelmed him. This fight would be to the death, but Kylo knew he wasn’t strong enough to overpower the other Knight.

"The mighty Kylo Ren can barely wield his own lightsaber! Snoke was right; you are weak and foolish, like your father!" Jacen laughed. There was no fear in the other Knight’s eyes as there once had been when they faced each other. Kylo could see the thrill of recognition; Jacen knew his master was struggling, his body was surrendering to whatever weakness possessed him. No matter how skilled Kylo was, they both knew he would fall.

Physically, they were close to equally matched, even when Kylo was at his strongest. But Kylo could barely stand, and he couldn’t feel his connection to the Force. He had always wished he had been born without Force-sensitivity, but in that moment, he wanted nothing more than to feel its power surge through his veins. Kylo was struggling against a man who knew his every weakness in a duel, but without the Force, it was no contest. His fate was an inevitability. Kylo didn’t fear death, but his mind was screaming that if he fell, there would be no one to stand between Jacen and Rey. He didn’t know how, but it was a truth he was certain of. If it was the last thing he did, he wouldn’t let her fall because of his mistakes.

Enough people had already died because of him. Jacen was right; he was weak and foolish. But his father was not. He had known what Kylo was too blind to see and knew that sacrificing himself was the only way to save... The realization settled over him with shivering clarity.

"I won’t fight you, Jacen. You have what you want. Let her go." Kylo said, raising his hands in surrender. “Please.”

"If you won’t fight, then you will die," Jacen sneered. “You may have been like my brother, but you took my sister from me. I will make you suffer, Kylo.” His eyes flashed with bitter contempt, and Kylo immediately recognized it as something he had seen in his own eyes when he looked in the mirror. Kylo hadn’t taken Jaina from him; he would have remembered that. Still, something inside him knew Jacen wasn’t lying. There was yet another ghost he would have to atone for.

"I'm being torn apart," Kylo whispered to his old friend, "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. Will you help me?" He swayed as he struggled to stand, staring into the eyes of the person he had failed. Jacen nodded once. They both knew it was the truth; this was the way it had to end. Rey screamed from somewhere behind him,
but his understanding that she was *there* only served to reinforce his decision. Through their bond, he had no doubt she could sense his grim acceptance and resolution; she knew what he was going to do.

Jacen cautiously walked toward his old friend, but Ben made no attempt to move. They both knew he had no strength left to fight. His knees shook as he struggled to stand. His hand let his deactivated lightsaber slip to the skyway with a loud clang. He kept his eye on the Knight as he approached but also on the woman closing in on them. She was nearly upon them.

*Do it. End this.*

Jacen grasped Kylo by the shoulder, never breaking eye contact. His pupils were blown, not an ounce of light reflected in them. Kylo wouldn't allow the darkness to be the last thing he saw. He closed his eyes, imagining Rey's bright smile under the stars and blocked her from the bond as best as he could in his weakened state. He exhaled slowly as he steeled himself; he'd had enough wounds by a lightsaber to anticipate the sharp burning pain that would soon pierce through him.

He thought back to all of the lives he had taken with his lightsaber. It had started with the other students at the Jedi temple. The sickening crescendo was his own father, whose death would not be in vain. *It only seems...right that it would end this way...for both of us.* If Jacen chose to strike his heart, he would likely only be able to hold on long enough to take advantage of their proximity and take his old friend down with him. He hoped that Jacen would be cruel and aim for his abdomen – if only so he could have one last moment with Rey.

Jacen chose his heart.

The heat of the blade burned through him. It stole his breath, but it wasn’t nearly as painful as he expected. With one last exertion, he called the lightsaber to his hand as he ignited it. Jacen jerked violently as the blade pierced through his abdomen. The fate of both men had been sealed. With betrayal in his eyes, Jacen collapsed to the skyway. A wave of weakness crashed over Kylo, and his knees gave out on him. As he fell backward, all he could hear was Rey’s screams.

Kylo jolted with the impact and opened his eyes. Gulping heaving breaths, he searched the darkness around him as the sleep-addled fog of his mind cleared. He was surrounded by warmth, and the pain was gone. Kylo checked for the lightsaber wound, but there was nothing. His heart still thudded strongly in his chest. Blinking as his eyes adjusted to the low light, he realized he was in his chambers on the *Finalizer.*

*It was a dream.*
Kylo refused to accept that it was anything other than a dream. He had called the Knights to his side in his fight against the First Order, and he had no reason to believe they would turn on him. The Knights' sole interest had always been to destroy Skywalker and the Jedi. Their loyalty was to each other, to their master – not to the First Order. They would feel as betrayed as he did that their master had lied about who he truly was. Kylo did not doubt that after everything they had suffered through together, they would stand by his side. And he would need their help to destroy Force Destiny, Sidious, his Dark Army, and the First Order.

It was merely a dream, a nightmare, and Kylo took comfort in that.

His eyes fluttered shut and he tried to talk himself into surrendering to the peace of unconsciousness again. His senses flared to full wakefulness, however, when he felt something warm move against him in his bed. In his panic, Kylo nearly threw himself to the floor, weapon already in hand. But with a bit of logic and cursory probe of the energy around him, he sighed and eased the weapon back onto the table with a gentle manipulation of the Force.

Not only had Rey fallen asleep in his arms, but she was still there. Had the Force allowed the connection to remain open as they slept? Or had the fear from his nightmare brought her back to him? It should have soothed him – awakening to her warmth – but nothing would ease his agitation. The dream most certainly hadn’t helped with that endeavor, but Kylo knew the true source of his disquiet.

Though he thought she would leave him to chase after her friend, she had stayed, and Kylo found it ironic that he questioned her decision. He still wondered what would have happened had they not been interrupted, but he knew how it would look to the Resistance. She was certain the traitor would protect her. As deeply as everything in Kylo yearned to disagree with her, he had no proof her friend would betray her. The traitor had seen them connected before, but her secret had remained safe from the others. She trusted her friend, and Kylo trusted her, as irritating as it was to rest her safety with a man he didn’t trust. So he had watched her fall asleep in his arms without further protest. He knew she had been exhausted from their grief and their argument, and part of him was selfish. He wanted her to stay.

This was a gift she had given him – staying – and he wouldn’t ruin it by his fatalist thoughts. Instead, he forced himself to lay back and revel in the warmth of her body against his. He stared up at the darkness above him, refusing to sleep. Not because of the threat of nightmares, but because he wanted to spend every last second he could with her. This was a chance he knew he would never experience again, and too soon time would take her from him. There was a part of him that recognized just how deeply he craved anything she would give him – it was a weakness Snoke… Sidious had warned him of endlessly under his tutelage.
The Jedi weakened you by teaching you to ignore your emotions. Anger, hate, pain – use them. Channel your suffering into strength. The goal of the dark side is power, but more importantly, survival. Your greatest revenge is surviving when your enemy does not. Give into your emotions, all except compassion. Compassion is a weakness. Your compassion will be used against you. It will be your downfall, just as it was your grandfather’s.

His master had seen it, had known of his weakness long before he admitted it to himself. You have compassion for her.

No – never. Compassion? For an enemy of the Order?

Kylo Ren. It appears that a reminder is in order.

If only Sidious could see him now. Perhaps a reminder was in order. Kylo could barely recognize himself from the man he had been under his former master. By the grace of your training, I will not be seduced. Oh, but he had, hadn’t he? His master was right, she would destroy him, he just couldn’t find it in himself to care. There was no darkness to grasp onto, no suffering to sharpen into a weapon, when he held her in his arms. There was no anger or fear or pain, only calm as he listened to her peaceful breathing, content and safe as she slept in his arms.

His thoughts weren’t focused on revenge or galactic domination or the past, but rather the braid in her hair and the rebellious strands that fell across her cheek, her strength and how she challenged him as no one else could, and the warmth of her light. The darkness was so far out of reach, he couldn’t feel it even when he thought about how she had been beyond infuriating as she blindly clutched to her ideals. There was nothing that could contend with the absurd happiness he felt when he thought about how she fought for him. The parts of him that still sounded remarkably like his former master reminded him that she only fought for him to save her friends, but that didn’t explain what she did.

She would deny it later, but he was almost certain, she had considered kissing him. Certainly, it was a lapse in judgment on her part, but she still touched him and wasn’t repulsed by it. She stayed. It was his fault, of course, he lost the composure to maintain his strong mental barriers when she told him she cared for him. It meant nothing to her but everything to him. He was a fool. There was no doubt she now knew how he felt for her – not that he was ever adept at hiding anything from her.

It was for the best that she didn’t kiss him, especially if it had been out of a misguided attempt to show him pity. Her regret would have wounded him, but not as deeply as losing the amicability between them. The kiss itself didn’t matter, he convinced himself, but what it represented did. Despite logic to the contrary, there was a small, foolish, fragile hope in his chest that there was something new between them that hadn’t been there before. For the first time in years, he held
There was a tiny voice that reminded him – if it all had been a deception as he had long presumed, there was no explanation for what happened with her friend. If she wanted to end the war, she had every opportunity to do it. She could have killed him or allowed her friend to do it. But she didn’t. She trusted him, she stood by him, she **defended** him. It had been years since anyone had done that for him. And she had not only defended him from her friend, but she defended him from *Luke Skywalker* – her hero – as well.

Maybe she understood him after she had seen his memories. Or, more likely, she hoped he could be someone he could never be. Whatever it was for her, his only certainty was that he had never known what he was missing until he felt her in his arms. Now he couldn’t let her go. He didn’t want it to end. But it had to, didn’t it? If the vision was true, then she would be lost to darkness if the bond remained. Only, that tiny voice reminded him that he hadn’t felt that powerful darkness in her since she held his lightsaber to his throat.

It should have been an easy decision; one that he had been certain of after he ended the bond nearly a week before. Their ideals were decidedly different, and neither would bend. Their argument had only been further confirmation of that. They could walk away on amicable, but understanding, terms. The bond would fade over time. The problem was, he didn’t **want** it to.

And the more he admitted to himself that he didn’t want to let her go, the more he wondered what truly was important to him. The more he agonized over every word she had said to him, the more he questioned himself. Kylo thought he had everything figured out. He thought he knew what he wanted. He had everything he ever desired and more: command over the First Order, master of the Knights of Ren, control of the galaxy. It was everything he’d worked for in his life up until that moment.

He should have been content, but as he watched her smile while she slept, he wondered, *why does it all mean nothing?*

Though he was loath to admit it, he knew what **did** mean something to him.

*Ben Solo is dead.*

*No, Ben Solo is not dead,* she had told him with such **certainty** that he wanted to believe her. *Offer me Ben’s hand again and I’ll take it.*
With the heat of the argument gone, he was left with nothing but the truth. As he felt her light warm him across the bond, he knew his former master was wrong. Everything he had sacrificed to the dark side only served to conflict him more. The Force was guiding him to a terrifying conclusion; maybe she was right. Maybe Kylo Ren – and his grandfather by extension – was something he aspired to be, but never could attain. He was always too conflicted, always felt the pull to the light. He tried with everything he had to kill that side of him – the weak and foolish side of him. He failed.

But if Kylo Ren is just a mask as you claim, then who am I?

Rey said she saw something in him that he couldn’t see. Could he trust her that it was there if he just fought hard enough? Could he ignore every time he had trusted before, every time that trust had been broken? Could he ignore every time he had tried, given them everything, but it wasn’t good enough? Could he weather another round of her hatred when he inevitably disappointed her again?

She spoke with such conviction, as though it were that easy. Maybe for her, it was. Everything seemed to come so easily for her. No matter what life dealt her – and it had dealt her the worst he could imagine – no matter her struggles, she persevered. He wished he had her strength. Kylo? He gave them all everything he had, and it had never – not once – been good enough for anyone. What happened when he inevitably failed to be what she wanted? Where would he be? What would he be?

Nothing.

Without the First Order, the Knights, and the power of the dark side, he had nothing, he would be nothing. He was a shadow; it had consumed him for so long, without darkness he would disappear. He would always feel the pull from the darkness. To deny it was to deny a part of himself. If he couldn’t be what she wanted him to be, then what was the point? Was he supposed to abandon his destiny?

Kylo had sacrificed everything. Everything! He believed in what the First Order would do for the galaxy. No, he believed in what the First Order could do, if the others had a similar vision for the galaxy. He wanted a new Order. He wanted an Order that overcame the lawlessness, corruption and moral detachment of those who had failed before him. Unfortunately, the longer he endured the painfully tiring discussions with the higher command, the more he realized how profoundly his ideals differed from the path of the First Order. He believed it would be simpler to convince them, but he had been naïve. He wanted order, but they were intent on creating chaos.

Even if he could ensure her safety – which he couldn’t – if he defected, their plans would be realized. There would be more Starkillers, more Hosnian Primes and Alderaans. Rey was right;
they would be no less self-serving than the Republic. At least he was trying. Without his interference, the fate of Rey and her friends would be bleak. If Sidious returned, it would be hopeless.

Even if Kylo could leave without consequence – which he couldn’t – what then? He couldn’t be a valiant resistance hero like the pilot or the traitor. He couldn’t go back to who he used to be, the man she envisioned from his memories, because he had always been forced to be someone else. Who he was had never been good enough for anyone, so he had tried to be what they wanted him to be. His parents wanted him to suppress the Force, Luke wanted him to suppress the darkness, and Snoke wanted him to suppress the light. Ben was as fake as Kylo Ren.

What was the point of any of it? Why did she care? What did she want from him?

To save him?

From what? Death?

Leaving the Order wouldn’t save him. When he seized the position of Supreme Leader, he sealed his own fate. Whether by the hand of the Resistance, First Order, or her... he had never intended to survive it. His only choice was how it ended.

His thoughts were interrupted when Rey reached her arm across his chest and pulled herself into his warmth. He wasn’t certain he had been as close to anyone as he had been to her in that moment. His eyes wandered back down to her face. She opened her eyes, blinking the sleep away. “You’re still here,” she smiled. His throat clenched as he forced himself to swallow past the tightness. He was terrified of the moment the Force would separate them again, but he was equally terrified of these moments. She had an undeniable control over him. “Sleep... Ben.”

“I can’t,” he breathed.

“What’s wrong?” she asked drowsily. The softness of her expression and the raspy breathiness of her voice were far more intimate than he expected them to be. It triggered that flighty feeling in his chest again – something he was beginning to associate with her. It was as exhilarating as it was unfamiliar. It was destabilizing. He knew he had no right to that knowledge, loathed the vulnerability of it, but he still found himself committing it all to memory. He both yearned for more and wished he had never seen this side of her.
Rey shifted to study him, and he felt the warmth of her fingers on his chest. His traitorous heart began thundering underneath her fingertips. It was difficult to remember the last time he had been touched like that. Had he ever been touched like that? It made him feel both alive and at peace. Kylo tried to remind himself that sharing beds was likely a common occurrence for her – a practical matter for a rebellion with limited space – that she wasn’t affected by it like he was. His mind, however, unhelpfully focused on how perfectly she fit in his arms, how calm he felt basking in her light, and how content her features were when she looked at him. She had never looked at him that way before.

His voice was thick with disuse. “What do you want from me, Rey?”

“For you to get out of your own head and go to sleep.” Kylo nearly laughed as she lowered her head to his shoulder. Sleep was far beyond the realm of possibilities. He was hyperaware; he could feel the tickle of her eyelashes as she blinked, he could feel the heat of her breath on his skin, and he could hear the slide of material as she shifted next to him on his bed. He had memorized the sound of her steady breaths and the rhythm of her heartbeat and the warmth of her touch. It was intimate and domestic and terrifying. He was content to never sleep again.

Rey reached up and traced the scar down his face and onto his shoulder. It was almost… possessive. He shuddered, but not from latent fear. “You know what I mean,” he rasped.

“And you know what I want.” She wanted impossible things; she made him want impossible things. “I feel the conflict in you, Ben,” she whispered sleepily, allowing her fingers to branch over the hidden scars under his skin.

“I know.”

He wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly as she fell asleep.
Imagined violence - a character experiences lethal wounds in a dream
Premonition

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Rey found herself in a dark room, the figures within obscured by smoke. The only light in the room was a flashing red alarm. Her heart pounded as she walked deeper into the room. “Rey!” she heard Finn cry out from beyond her sight. She pressed forward into the darkness. Something terrifying was lurking in the shadows; she could feel its evil stare as it watched her. Her friends were in danger, and she was running out of time.

She could see a figure, a shadow, emerge from the mist. The silhouette looked familiar – tall,
broad, dressed in all black. The man had his arm outstretched, his fingers clenched. “Ben?” As she stepped closer, she noticed two other shadows in the mist. They were on their knees, grasping at their throats. It was Finn and Rose, she realized. It wasn’t until she heard the soft gasping sounds that she realized what he had done. They collapsed backward on the ground and the vision of Finn’s jacket and the body covered by a gray blanket flashed in her mind. She had no doubt he would kill them. “Why, Ben!” she screamed.

All three disappeared with her shout and she was left alone in the heavy darkness. Her only company was her heavy breathing as she stepped further into the room. As she followed the flashing red light, she found him by a control pane. He was illuminated by the flashing light above that was unlike the others, this one was blue. No, it wasn’t as much blue as it was… indigo. “Rey?” He looked like her bondmate, he sounded like her bondmate, but he couldn’t be her bondmate. This man was dressed in the color of blood.

“You’re not the real Ben,” she said as she called her lightsaber to her hand. It wasn’t hers – this lightsaber – yet its energy spoke of a familiarity and intimacy that she couldn’t explain.

_He will kill your friends_, a voice told her, _he must be stopped._

Stepping forward, she grasped the hilt tightly, her hands shaking as she pressed the weapon against his abdomen. There was fear in his eyes, but also an incredible darkness. “I am Ben,” he told her, “I won’t hurt you, Rey.”

It wasn’t true; she knew it wasn’t. His hand wrapped around the hilt of the lightsaber, and she felt his intention to use it against her. The Force was alight in warning. Her friends were in danger; she could feel their energy fading in the Force. They were dying, and she knew who was to blame. “You’ll die for what you did,” she spat at him. “Any last words?”

There was no emotion reflected in the pools of darkness that stared back at her. “You know what I have to do,” he said. She struggled to pull the weapon away from him, but he was unrelenting. Rey felt her own darkness swell inside her.

There was a whisper in the dark, “Yes.” It was Kylo’s voice. “Kill him.”

The glow of the plasma reflected in his eyes as she activated the weapon. His body jerked in shock as the blade pierced through him, blood staining his trembling lips. Her eyes raised slowly to his. He smiled weakly and reached up to touch her face. Her heart broke staring into the warmth of his familiar, searching eyes.
“It was you,” she realized. This was no imposter whose fate she delivered at the end of her blade. With trembling fingers, Kylo cupped her face and kissed her gently. The warmth of his lips was too fleeting, but when he pulled away, he offered her a mesmerizing, dimpled smile. It was almost enough for her to forget what she had done, but then his eyes fluttered, and he began to sway. Kylo dropped to his knees and she collapsed beside him, grasping his tunic to ease his descent to the floor. “Ben,” she cried as he reached up to wipe the tears from her cheek. “Please stay with me.” She trapped his palm against her cheek, pleading with him to hold on as his eyes pooled with sorrow. They both knew he couldn’t stay. His hand fell away as the light in his eyes faded. The Force grew heavy around her, and one final breath escaped his lips. The man she had fought to save was dead, because of her.

“Ben!” Rey awoke with a start. She gasped for breath, tears dampened her cheeks as she searched the darkness of the room.

The temple room.

_It was only a dream._

She tempered her uneven breaths as she re-accustomed herself to reality. The last threads of the dream were rooted deep into her consciousness, leaving her caught in a state of uncertain reality. It had felt real. Too real. She wanted Kylo to wrap his arms around her and tell her it was just a dream. His calm voice would temper her fears, and everything would be okay when he held her. But she could feel the emptiness in the Force; she was alone in her bed.

It should have been simple – routine – to be alone. She had slept alone her entire life. They had only lain in each other’s arms for a few short hours, but now that she knew what it felt like, she didn’t want to sleep alone anymore. She had almost kissed him, but knowing the warmth of his touch, learning the softness of his eyes when his hardened mask had been lost to the early morning hours, and trusting him when she was at her most vulnerable and defenseless was more intimate than a kiss could ever be.

Exposing a side of herself no other man had witnessed – and baring a side of him no mask could ever hope to hide – hadn’t seemed as consequential at the time, but she knew she would never lie in her bed without thinking of him again. The air in the room was too oppressive as she attempted to calm her thundering heart. Her skin crawled with longing until she decided she couldn’t stay in
that room another second.

Rey grabbed her blanket and sleep mat, heading into the darkness of the corridors in search of fresh air. When she neared the temple exit, she paused at the entrance of the mess hall. With hours left in the Barkhesh night, she liberated some portion packets from the supply in hopes the bond would connect them again before sunrise. She climbed the steps to the apex of the temple, sighing in relief when she reached the entrance. She breathed in deeply, the cool night air soothing her agitation. The twinkling stars above her head were a welcome change of scenery.

The forest was dangerous at night, but Rey was on a mission. She jogged quietly through the trees in search of something suitable. It was no different than scavenging in the endless labyrinths of Star Destroyers. When she set out, she didn’t know what she was looking for, but she would know when she saw it. Weaving through the trees, she split her attention between her search and anticipating danger. She walked parallel to the temple so she could easily escape.

As if the world itself wanted to assist in her search, Rey’s eyes were drawn to a sliver of moonlight that had penetrated through the canopy. The ray of light shone on thick vines wrapped around a tree. On the vines were small, orange and red swirled spheres.

Berries.

Biting her lip to contain her excitement, Rey picked a berry and squeezed a drop of fluid on her gums; a habit she had learned from her life on Jakku. She wasn’t typically a cautious person – throwing herself across vast expanses of Imperial Destroyers before she considered whether it was possible – but this was different. Though the deserts of Jakku were unforgiving to those ignorant or reckless enough to underestimate its cruelty, it was the enticing Tuanulberry bushes that tempted too many to their death with its toxic berries. Rey had spent days in Death’s shadow – curled up at the bottom of her AT-At retching bile and blood – after she had stumbled upon those berries. She had no intention of allowing herself or anyone she cared for to suffer that fate again.

Rey waited by the vine, scanning the darkness for other dangers as she rubbed more of the juice into her gums. When her mouth didn’t lose sensation or feel like she bit into the heat of a thousand suns, she decided it was safe. Popping a berry into her mouth for good measure, she plucked just as many as she would need, then set off for the safety of the temple.

Settling down on the sleep mat she had laid across the cool stone under the archway, she wrapped the blanket around herself. She opened the portion packet of sweetened polystarch and mixed in water from her canteen as she had done thousands of times before. Rey crushed the berries to make a thick paste and spread it over the rounded surface of the polystarch. It was messy, but as Rey licked the juice from her fingers, she was pleased that it tasted like she imagined the finest delicacies in the galaxy would taste. Satisfied, she set her creation aside and tilted her head to study
the vast expanse of stars.

*Oh, Ben, I wish you were here to see this.*

It was beautiful, and he had offered it all to her. As a lowly scavenger, it was a significant offer. Despite the part of herself that imagined never wanting for anything again, she didn’t want to possess it – only to explore its wonders. What Kylo wanted was like plucking a flower. The selfish desire to keep it would ultimately lead to its death. Its beauty could only truly be appreciated by admiring it and ultimately allowing it to thrive on its own. The galaxy was never meant to be under one man’s – or woman’s – control. In an attempt to save the galaxy, the oppressive domination would ultimately lead to its destruction.

Rey wished Kylo would understand that. The true value of the galaxy did not lie in the power of its civilizations. There was far more to the galaxy than its wealth. The galaxy was already theirs…. to explore. They could spend the rest of their lives enjoying the beauty it had to offer in its endlessness. Somewhere out in its vastness was Jakku and Takodana, Ahch-To and Crait, Starkiller and the remains of the Hosnian system. Somewhere out in its vastness was adventure.

Somewhere out in its vastness was Kylo.

He felt closer when she imagined him on the *Finalizer*, staring up at those same stars, making choices that would affect them all. She wondered which star was closest to him. She wondered if he’d tell her, so she could find him in the night sky. Perhaps that would ease the dull ache in her chest.

*Where are you right now, Ben?*

“Next to you.”

Rey startled, turning her head toward his voice. “You’re projecting again, Rey,” he whispered. He was sitting under the archway next to her, leaning back on his hands, long legs extended in front of him on the temple steps. His chin was tilted up, staring at the same dark heavens.

“I brought you here… by thinking of you,” she said as she studied his face. His expression was soft, but he looked terrible. He had just lost his mother; she doubted she looked any better. “Did I wake you?”
He chewed his lip to hide a smile. “You didn’t wake me,” he said, eyes still fixed on the stars above them. “And I was thinking of you, too.”

Her heart leapt with something warm and weightless.

“Well, if it was me, I’m not sorry that you’re here,” she yawned.

“Me, neither.”

The bond between them was warm and bright with their amicability. Even after their argument over ideals earlier that night, something had changed between them. He had changed. Despite what had happened, his energy didn’t feel as burdened as it had in the past. She didn’t want the day to end, fearful of what the morning would bring as he fell back into the role of the Supreme Leader.

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, until she remembered her trek to the forest. “You were born today,” she reminded him, as though he’d forgotten.

“Is that supposed to be an insult –”

“I meant it is your Anniversary of Birth –”

“According to Galactic Standard Time, not anymore –”

“I think it counts until sunrise –”

“I’d rather it didn’t,” he sighed. “I hate birthdays.”

“Well, I thought I’d try to make it a little better,” she said softly, lifting her creation with outstretched hands. He stared at her, expression unreadable.

Rey had been excited when she made it for him, but it faded when she presented it to him and saw it in a more realistic lens. The sweetened polystarch cake looked absurd with an uneven and sloppy spread of lumpy, mashed berries. Kylo wasn’t the Jedi-in-training with the boyish smile; he was
the Supreme Leader. With all the food in the entire galaxy at his fingertips, why would he touch a ration loaf with random berries from the forest? How could she be so naïve?

She lowered her hands in shame, but before she could toss it away, it lifted from her hand. Raising her eyes to follow its path, she watched Kylo’s fingers manipulate the cake until it landed in his palm. He split the ration loaf in half and handed one of the pieces to her. Her brows narrowed in confusion.

“It is customary,” he said. “to share the birthday cake.” With a dip of his head in gratitude, he lifted the pseudo-cake in a silent toast. She expected him to take an experimental bite, but he popped the entire portion into his mouth. There were residual crumbs stuck to his lips, and Rey watched him lick them clean. She hid a shiver when he began sucking the berry juice from each finger as well. When he noticed her observing him, she glanced away, blushing. To distract herself from the heat of a combination of shame and something a little more frenzied, she bit into her portion of the cake.

It was… not as delicious as she expected. She forced herself to swallow it down – there was no point in wasting perfectly edible food – but the mixture of artificially sweetened, overly dry bread, and the inconsistently tart berries did not blend well together. As they swallowed it down, their eyes remained locked, studying each other’s reaction.

“That was disgusting,” she sighed finally, “and that's coming from someone who ate rations her entire life.”

Her heart stuttered as his face broke out into a wide smile, transforming his entire countenance. “Repulsive,” he said in amusement. Rey decided she would swallow her awful concoction of ration polystarch mixed with possibly toxic berries every day, just to see him smile like that.

“At least it wasn’t chocolate,” she replied with a smile of her own. There was something like awe reflecting in his eyes. He smiled again, something softer than before, but it was equally breathtaking. “Happy Birthday, Ben.”

“I’m… thanks, Rey.” He took his smile with him when he turned his stare back to the stars. “When is yours – birthday, I mean?”

“I don’t know.” Rey shrugged, but she knew he felt the pain hiding there. She couldn’t hide the real her from him if she tried. He hadn’t turned, but she knew the entirety of his attention was focused on her.
“Why don’t you pick one?”

It was absurd, wasn’t it? To just pick a birthday? It would be meaningless, wouldn’t it? Her mind helpfully reminded her that Finn had chosen his name; why couldn’t she choose a birthday? It was just a date, but the decision seemed daunting. Rey dragged her fingers over the cracks in the stone steps. “I don’t know what to pick.”

Kylo hummed, as if he knew her indecision went far beyond choosing a date. “What’s the happiest day you can remember?”

There was no simple answer. Her best days were also her worst. She finished restoring a ship, but it was stolen. She met her best friend, but she was dragged into that awful war. Finn came back for her on Starkiller, but Han was killed. She had found Luke Skywalker to help her find belonging, but he wanted nothing to do with her. Kylo saved her, but he chose to become Supreme Leader. The bond had changed between them, but Leia was gone. There was one moment she still thought about regularly. It had been interrupted, but every time she thought of it, she was filled with hope.

“What was the date we touched hands?”

Kylo snorted, and he turned with humor in his eyes. His face grew serious, however, when he saw the sincerity in hers. There was something heated that passed across his stare, but it was gone before she could study it. He returned his attention to the stars in pensive silence. Fearing she’d upset him, she found a safer subject.

“Are you still in your bed?” Rather than answering, she felt a spike in his Force energy. The archway of the temple dissolved away, and she was abruptly sitting on black sheets under a large viewport. The night sky above his bed was dusted with stars, but they were blurred into the brilliant vortex of hyperspace.

“How did you do that?”

He answered again by changing their environment back to the quiet night atop the stone temple. “It’s all the same Force. Visualize what you want and manipulate it to your will,” he said quietly.

“If you can control it, why did you choose to see my side?”
“I spend the majority of my time in the isolation of these walls, breathing recycled air, on a destroyer in open space. They can replicate quite a bit of the sensation of being ‘on-world,’ but fresh air from a real atmosphere is not one of them.” His tone sounded almost… wistful. What if his power and wealth wasn’t enough? He wasn’t happy; what if there was a chance he could be? What if it wasn’t too late to help him leave? Even if his family was gone, and all hope seemed lost, her heart told her that he could still free himself of the evil that had stolen his loyalty. She could help him, if only she could find a good enough reason for him to leave. They could find where his loyalty was supposed to belong before his destiny had been decided for him. Her devising was abandoned, however, when he spoke again. “I like it better where you are, that’s all.”

Rey bit her thumb as she grinned. There was something soft and candid to his words; a vulnerability that Kylo’s eyes often revealed, but his tongue did not. It was something that could only be found in those raw, dreamlike hours when the rest of their worlds slept. Their worlds—opposing in every way—and yet, he could switch back and forth between them with ease. “Can you show me how you do it?”

Without abandoning his study of the galaxy he sought to control, he answered, “Just take it.”

She pressed into his memories, searching for the knowledge she needed. He flinched as she found it. For the first time, she wondered if what she was doing to him was painful. She didn’t bother asking, knowing her bondmate would never admit to it, even if it was. She focused on the surrounding energy, separating the warmth of her environment and the chill of his. Once they were separated, she was able to move between them, her surroundings fading into his and then back into hers. It was nothing new. As the bond strengthened, they seemed to be pulled entirely into one side or the other, but she had never been capable of controlling it. As his environment disappeared completely, it was as if he were actually sitting there with her. She wished she could forget that he wasn’t. What would her life have been like if she wasn’t forced to stand between him and her friends?

“I wish you were here,” she whispered.

“I am here.”

“I mean, truly here.” She studied his expression for a glimmer of reciprocal feelings; but his scowl was guarded, his stare fixed above them. He remained quiet, contemplative, and she wished she were privy to the thoughts he kept hidden.

When he finally answered, his words were so soft, they were nearly stolen by the gentle breeze. “I know.”
“Maybe someday...”

Kylo didn’t answer. His unspoken words were left drifting among the stars.
Imagined Violence - imagined injuries in a dream
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Kylo didn’t know when it started, this fascination with her, this magnetism. There was an attraction in the conventional sense, yes, but it hadn’t started that way. It should have been physical at first. It would have been simpler if it was something he could explain away as biology. With Sidious in his head, he had long ago learned to curb his… desires. If it were only attraction, he could have acknowledged it and moved on as he did with everyone else. He had tried to move past his fascination with her.

He had failed spectacularly.
Watching her now, as she stared at the vast universe before them, there was a soft hopefulness about her that reminded him of the moment she arrived on the *Supremacy* in that escape pod. She had looked *ethereal*, and he had done everything in his power not to drop to his knees before her in that crowded hangar. What terrified him was that he had been drawn to her long before that hangar. From the moment he heard about her, there was a fascination with her he couldn’t explain. From the moment she fired upon him the first time, he couldn’t help but wonder if it was *her* – his childhood hope.

When he had seen her dreams and memories – her past – and she had seen his deepest fears, he felt a connection, a deeper knowledge shared, long before he first felt the bond when she accessed his skills in the snow. Once their souls were connected, had he even had a chance? In the hut, that deep knowledge evolved into *understanding*.

She had *seen* him in a way no one else had, not even his close friends at the temple. She had seen the monster – he could hide nothing from her – yet she reached across the galaxy for *him*. He had recognized her strength and wit, but it hadn’t properly occurred to him how beautiful she was until after she had touched his hand by that fire. Her wet hair that had fallen around her bare shoulders begged him to touch it, the fire reflecting in her eyes burned a fire inside him, and the *promise* she made him had changed the course of his destiny irrevocably. He thought he had been mistaken when she had refused him in the throne room – he thought she hated him – but now…

Now, he wasn’t so certain what she wanted from him. Rey wanted him to turn, of course, and to save her friends, but there was something else. The events of the past twenty-four hours proved that. She would never reciprocate what *he* felt, he knew that, but it wasn’t just hatred. He wasn’t just her enemy. Was it attraction? Friendship? A kinship like she shared with the rest of his family? He didn’t know yet. What he did know was that she was there with him, willingly, and that was enough.

“You’re quiet,” Rey said. He could sense her studying him, but he refused to meet her eyes. He feared the emotion he would see in them.

Kylo searched for an honest explanation for his silence. Staring up at the stars, he decided there was nothing safe about his thoughts, and chose to side-step the question entirely to preserve the tentative amicability that had formed between them. “Space is… complex, and infinite, and impossible to contemplate,” he said, his voice sounding distant even to himself. “Yet we look to it when deliberating our own lives. We look to it for answers… even though what we see is a lie. There is so much darkness, but we ignore it to worship the light. And the light you see from those stars – it isn’t the truth. Not anymore. When we look to the stars, all we see is the past. Still, there’s so much beauty among so much conflict, isn’t there?”

Rey hummed. “When you describe it like that, it reminds me of you.” He could still feel the heat of her stare as she spoke, and he knew she was waiting for a reaction. Instead, he resisted the
temptation to turn his head, and wondered what part of space reminded her of him. “Maybe that’s why I spent so many nights on Jakku watching the stars.”

*You didn’t remember that I existed.* “You were waiting for your parents.”

“I knew I was waiting for *someone* who was gone, but maybe I was wrong when I thought it was my family,” she answered, and that was enough to draw his attention. Her expression was inexplicably soft. When had she started looking at *him* like that? He feared the moment it would change again. “Why are you not asleep?”

Kylo hadn’t been mocking her desperation to sleep when he searched her mind in the interrogation room, he had been sympathizing. Sleep was like happiness; it was so simple for others, but it escaped him. He didn’t tell her that the last night he had slept more than an hour at a time was the night he had become Kylo Ren. He didn’t tell her about the nightmares – the ghosts – that plagued his dreams, demanding his rest and peace as penance for their deaths. He didn’t tell her of his pathetic fear whenever he awoke, believing in the fog of sleep that he was not alone in his room. He didn’t tell her, but when he turned to look at her, something in her eyes was knowing.

*Understanding.*

Was he doing it again; allowing himself to see things that weren’t there, believing anyone could possibly see him as more than what the galaxy saw?

“I sleep better now since I left that place. I’m less lonely, too,” she said. “It was hard to leave, but maybe it’s the only way to change for the better.” He knew what she was trying to do, but she didn’t understand that leaving for him was not that simple. They had already argued at length why he couldn’t do what she wanted, and he refused to address it again, there was a more pressing matter at hand.

“Is that why you’re awake right now?”

“Well, I had a nightmare,” she admitted. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s better than Jakku, but I’m still… different. I don’t sleep or eat or celebrate or think like they do. I don’t fit in here like they do. Sometimes they look at me like they’re scared of me. No one understands me.”

“I do,” he said without considering whether she would find that of any comfort. *You know you’re different than them, but you stay with them, helping them fight the monsters they fear in the hope*
they will accept you. Until one day, they turn on you, and you become the monster they fear. He understood it all too well, just as he understood the torment of nightmares. It hadn’t been the answer he was expecting, but he still hoped she would admit the truth. He repeated a question he had asked her before. “Nightmares – do you have them often?”

You, Supreme Leader? Concerned? For anyone other than yourself? Her voice echoed in his memories. My dreams are of no consequence to you.

If he hadn’t realized the change in their bond before, he would have seen it now with her response. “Yes, every night usually. Mostly it’s the past. Sometimes it feels like a vision from the Force. Sometimes it’s you.”

“And tonight?” His voice was weak, somehow, he already knew the answer. He was the monster of her nightmares. “Was it about what happened between your friend and I?”

It was a risk, asking her about the confrontation earlier, but she hadn’t spoken about it at all. He tried to understand that she trusted her friend, but – accidentally or not – the traitor had nearly killed her in his rage. Kylo didn’t know their relationship well, but he did know what it looked like when a man was betrayed.

The traitor had witnessed the… near affection between them. He had told her to kill Kylo like they had planned, and then left believing that – when asked to choose – she had not chosen him. Whether Rey believed it or not, he was dangerous.

The problem was – she would never believe anything Kylo said about her friend. For all he knew, she blamed him for what happened, not the traitor. Perhaps she dreamt that he killed the traitor as she had nearly done on Starkiller. Everything he did would appear as if he was trying to distance her from her friends, and she wouldn’t be wrong. He didn’t trust that she was safe now that his mother was gone. Dameron had nearly killed her before and if he discovered this… there would be little he could do to help her. As long as they were bonded, she wasn’t safe there. She needed to run, but she would never trust him enough to understand that.

If he was a stronger – less selfish – man, he would destroy the bond to keep her safe. But he couldn’t do it. He knew he should do it, end it however he could, but he feared it wasn’t enough. What if it was already too late? What if the Resistance turned on her? What if the First Order found her? What if she needed his help and he wasn’t there? He was too weak with fear.

“No,” she answered finally, “it wasn’t about Finn. But I did have a vision once, Finn was dead under a blanket on the Millennium Falcon, and I was scared you put him there.”
Would he do it? Would he kill her friend? He had chances, plenty of chances. He didn’t want to hurt her, but he wasn’t naïve enough to believe that there weren’t possible scenarios where he would be forced to take that man’s life. To defend himself? Possibly. To defend her? There was no question. And after their confrontation, that was exactly what he feared it would come to. “Listen to me, I didn’t hurt him even though he nearly killed you. But what is your plan here? He believed you wanted me dead, Rey, and I doubt he assumes that anymore. Am I wrong to suspect that Dameron is in charge now? Do you understand how exponentially more dangerous this has just become for you? What happens the next time he finds us together? What happens now? You could be executed for being seen with me. If your friend tells Dameron what he saw…”

She shook her head emphatically. “He won’t.”

“You’re so sure,” he said, voice low, as he tried to control his hatred for a known traitor.

“He won’t.”

You can’t know that! You can’t know that he will put you over the safety of the Resistance – the safety of his fiancée! I am your enemy! This is treason! “Would you bet your life on it?”

Rey met his fiery gaze with hesitation. “Yes!”

“Would you bet mine?”

Kylo didn’t know why he said it; what led him to believe she cared at all, what convinced him that it would break through her obstinance. But her certainty faded. Something haunted and pained passed over her expression. Tears pooled in her eyes and her voice was suddenly overcome with emotion. “I’ll tell him the truth, okay? I’ll explain everything tomorrow. I know him; he’ll understand. Please, I just can’t take any more of this tonight.”

He wanted to remind her of the night Luke had seen the flash of a consequential vision in his nephew’s mind. He wanted to remind her of that naïve boy thinking those same damning words, I’ll tell him the truth in the morning. He wanted to remind her of what happened that night. But all he could see was her tears, all he could manage was, “What happened?”

“I dreamt I killed you, Ben,” she cried. “I thought it was someone only pretending to be you, but it wasn’t. You died in my arms and it was all my fault. It wasn’t my friends or the First Order, it
was me. It felt so... real. I don’t care about what Finn saw earlier, I care about that. I care about a future with you in it.”

A shivering energy passed through him. It was the same sensation he had felt that night on Starkiller when she ignited his grandfather’s weapon – bathing herself in a cerulean hue. Something felt terrifyingly familiar with those words. It felt like a memory he couldn’t quite touch, but somehow knew was there. He could almost imagine her voice screaming it.

“I deserve a future with you in it! You don’t have to do this! You don’t have to die!”

Perhaps it wasn’t a memory of the past, but a memory of a dream. Had he seen it, the moment of his death? There was no shiver of truth as he imagined her killing him. No, he hadn’t foreseen his death, but he remembered those words. It had to mean something. He swallowed the miserable acceptance rising in his throat. “That sounds like a vision.”

“Don’t talk like that,” she said through tears. He couldn’t deny the misery he recognized in her voice. He could feel it. “My greatest fear is that I won’t save you. I just lost your mother, I can’t lose you too. It would destroy me if I was the one to…”

Kill you.

How could he comfort her when he knew the inevitability of his fate? “Rey, we’re equals in the Force,” he said softly. “The odds that you’ll kill me are good. But if you do kill me, it won’t be in darkness, I promise you that. I won’t let you fall.”

“Stop talking like that!”

He knew it upset her, but it was the truth. “What am I supposed to say?”

“You’re supposed to comfort me.” She sighed as she gestured vaguely with her hand. “Tell me you’ll be okay. Tell me it’s not too late, that I can save you.” Rey was strong. She didn’t need comfort. Comfort was the denial of truth. The comfort of believing her family would return was what kept her suffering on Jakku for over a decade.

“Do you want comfort or honesty?” he said bluntly. He didn’t intend for it to come out so... harsh, but he wouldn’t pander to her delusions. “You can have one or the other, not both.”
Even though he couldn’t bring himself to look at her, he could feel the warmth of her challenging smile in the bond. “Comfort.”

Though he still didn’t understand why – what did it matter if he survived – he knew what was important to her in that moment. “No matter what happens, I’ll be okay.”

“Then promise me. Promise me you’ll leave the First Order. Promise me we won’t be on opposite sides anymore. Promise me you’ll survive this. Please…” Her tone was beseeching; he knew she was sincere in her desire to save him, but his promises meant more to him than maintaining the peace.

“No, because it’s a comforting lie,” he said unequivocally. Rey sighed in vexation. He didn’t know what she wanted. If she needed comfort, hope, denial, he was certain that someone at the Resistance would be more than happy to help her. But it would do her no favors to pretend.

“And the truth?”

_You can’t save me, it’s too late, I will die before this is over._

He paused to search for a less harsh truth. “I don’t know exactly what the future holds for me, but, whatever happens, you’ll be okay,” he assured her.

“If you die, I won’t be okay,” she whispered. It hurt more than he cared to admit. Why did she care? His uncle had tried to kill him. His parents had sent their best pilot to kill him on Starkiller. Every single one of his nights would kill him to take his place. The Resistance would execute him, as would the First Order. Had his life ever meant anything to anyone?

“Why?” he rasped. “I don’t understand, Rey. Can you imagine how many people you care about would be alive right now if I wasn’t? Why do you care? Why does my life matter now, when it didn’t before?” When she first saw him on Takodana, she shot at him. His parents had sent their best pilot to kill him on Starkiller. When they were first brought together by the Force, she shot at him again. She left him for dead on the Supremacy. She tried to kill him while he slept. Then she had seen his memories and… everything changed.

He felt the heat of her glare again. “Why does it matter to you that I live?”
Kylo recognized her attempt to use his tactic of counter-questioning, but this was one question he was willing to answer. “Because your importance to me is not based upon my turning you to win a war.”

Her retort was sharp. “Neither is yours.”

“For someone who isn’t trying to turn me, you certainly are focusing on it,” he intoned, fighting the urge to meet her stare. He couldn’t look at her, not when they were talking about this. Not when she could see the weight of her words in his eyes.

“Ben, I need you to understand something. I don’t want to use you or pity you or turn you for the galaxy’s sake. I want you to turn, I want you to be saved, for you. I know your past, I know the struggle of darkness, and I know who you truly are. I know you can turn, but your importance to me is not dependent upon you turning. If you want to stay with the First Order, I won’t stop you. I won’t join you, I won’t support the things you do, I will hate every minute that you’re there, but I won’t let you be alone, either. I believe you’ll find your way on your own. I believe in you,” and that was enough to drag his eyes from the stars. “Until then, I’m here for you any way I can be. I promise.”

It was a mistake to look at her. Kylo turned away, not because it angered him, but because he was on the verge of tears. She believed in him. It seemed impossible, yet there was only truth in her eyes.

“I’m just terrified that my friends will find you first, and you would let them kill you.” Kylo could hear the weight of her emotion in her voice. It hurt to know he did this to her. He wished he could tell her she was wrong.

“It’s not that I would let them,” he sighed. “It’s that I don’t see this ending any other way. There’s nowhere to go from the top except down. You said it yourself: they plan to use you to kill me. It’s a valid strategy; one I fear would be successful.”

“Do you want to die?”

He shook his head, lowering his gaze to his hands. “Not anymore.”

“Ben,” she whispered. The way she said his name upended his entire galaxy every time she said it.
He knew by her tone that she was demanding his gaze, and he knew he didn’t have it in him not to obey. His eyes found hers in the moonlight. “I saw your memories. From the earliest one with the droid, you were a fighter. After everything you’ve been through, you would just give up? Accept your fate?”

“Heaven you ever played Dejarik?” he asked, watching first confusion then irritation flicker across her face. She thought it was another diversion tactic, so he continued without waiting for an answer. “My father tried to teach me games of cards and chance, but I always favored something more like war… when chance and hope are useless. You’re either the best or you’re not. Before I knew how to fight, I knew how to win. There’s a place for strength on the battlefield, but when it comes to war, I’d rather outsmart my opponent. War is like Dejarik; it’s the battle of minds. My strategy for this war was… short-sighted. I outsmarted my opponent, I took the throne, but I was too distracted to anticipate. There’s a point in a losing game when you know your choices were miscalculated, your sacrifices were inadequate, and your options have been exhausted. You don’t surrender, but you accept how it will inevitably end. That is where I am, Rey. This is approaching endgame, I can feel it, and my only concern is what I lose before I fall.”

“I care about Ben Solo being alive. I won’t let you die.” Rey was strong, fierce, and skilled, but she was also compassionate and forgiving. It shouldn’t have surprised him when she grasped his hand in her entreaty, but it did. He didn’t think he would ever become accustomed to her touch. It upended his entire galaxy.

“The pain… the conflict… this war… it all has to end eventually,” he said, reminding her as much as himself that all of this was only temporary. Happiness always was. “How do you realistically think this ends for me?”

“Fine, then take probability out of it. How do you want this to end?” she asked, her eyes searching his. Her expression was soft when she looked at him now, even when he was disagreeing with her, and he couldn’t overcome the significance it held for him.

“I want you to be alive,” he replied. “And free. And with people who will never leave you.”

“What about you?”

What would he want? Things monsters couldn’t have. Even if they were a galaxy apart, moments like this for the rest of eternity sounded better than anything he had ever imagined. Everything he had ever suffered was worth it when she held his hand like that. He didn’t want it to end, but it would, and that was what he forced himself to remember. Kylo knew his answer was a deflection – and an extraordinarily vague one at that. “I try not to think about it.”
“Ben... I know you. When you don’t want to answer something, you’re either quiet, derisive, deflecting, or stonewalling. Let’s just skip that part.”

“Fair enough,” he conceded, a ghost of a smile on his lips. She *knew* him. It didn’t terrify him, not as it would have had it been anyone else. He rewarded her with the truth. “This ends one of four possible ways for me; prison, exile, escape, or death. What am I *supposed* to want? Prison is unlikely for the severity of my crimes. As is exile. And I’m not going to run from my destiny.”

“You forgot defection.”

His stare fell to the hand she still held in hers. “Even if I defect, it still ends one of those four ways. How do you see this ending, Rey?”

Her voice was strong with hope and determination, and he couldn’t help admiring her for it despite her naïveté. “We’re connected in a way that no one else is. We’ll find a way to end this and be together. I believe that.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered, her voice waveriing in her attempt to convince them both. “I trust the Force will guide us.”

“And then what?” he pressed. “Become Jedi? Is that what you want? Because you don’t need me.”

“I told you earlier. You know what I want.” She turned her face back to the stars. He sensed her frustration join his in the bond, but she didn’t release his hand.

*You want to live in denial again.*

“You want things I cannot give you,” he said instead.

“Why? I thought I was ‘important’ to you?”
His stare hadn’t left the spot where their fingers were intertwined. “More than words can express.”

Her trembling shuddered through the bond. He sensed her surprise and confusion at his admission. “You would give me the entire galaxy, but not this?” He instinctively raised the shields around his mind higher to protect a fragile and vulnerable emotion that fluttered with her words. It overwhelmed his senses. It was desperately pure and warm. And it terrified him. He struggled with her question; he knew she could feel his conflict through the Force.

“This has nothing to do with...me or your importance to me, Rey. This has to do with reality. And consequences. You want impossible things.” His voice was deep with emotion. It was his traitorous heart that let more vulnerable words fall from his lips. “You make me want impossible things.”

Rey had fully turned to him now, and he reluctantly dragged his stare from their hands to meet her imploring stare. “If you could leave the First Order without consequence, would you do it?”

Kylo had always had difficulty imagining hypotheticals. It was impossible to envision, because he knew the scenario was unconditionally impossible. It seemed no better than a comforting delusion, and it would hurt less if he refused to contemplate it at all. “I don't know.”

“Why don’t you try, Ben?” she pleaded. She looked at him as if she knew exactly who he was, and he wished he could have been that imaginary man. Her eyes were bright with hope. “I'll help y...”

“Because I cannot leave without consequences,” he said emphatically. “If I leave, the Resistance will fall. Even if they can negotiate a surrender, which the Order under Hux will not grant them, you will all be executed.”

“If you stay, you die.”

“If I leave, we all die.”

Her other hand came up to rest against his cheek, covering the scar on his face. “But I don’t want you to die.”

Staring into her eyes, he was lost. He was weak. He was uncertain. He would give her anything –
the entire galaxy – if he knew she would take it. If she had asked anything of him in that moment of vulnerability, he would have done it. He would have left the First Order. He would have damned them all to a violent end, if she promised never to stop looking at him like *that*.

“Ben...” His stomach twisted with the breathy softness of his name on her lips. When had she drifted across the gap between them? Her chest was heaving, her face close enough that her warm breath disturbed the hair framing his face.

“You will live,” she said. Her voice was compelling, which snapped him out of his internal battle. If he didn’t know any better, he would believe his first instinct that she was practicing mind persuasion on him. Then he felt the unmistakable spike in the Force.

*Do you honestly think...*

Kylo pulled away from her grasp. His fear softened when he noticed she was failing to suppress a smile. She teasingly waved her hand over his face. “And we will fly away together, and you will take me to every one of those planets up there.” He wiped his hand across his mouth to hide the smirk playing on the corner of his lips. It had been years since he’d felt the bubble of a genuine laugh in his chest.

“Every single one?” He asked, his tone light with the hint of a chuckle. He couldn’t find it in himself to hide it.

“Yes! I have spent my entire life on Jakku. Every other planet I’ve seen, well, I’ve spent my time running from you. I just want to see the galaxy...with you.” Imagining it would have torn him apart, if the genuine and vulnerable look in her eyes didn’t already do it first. When she stared at him as if... as if he was *not* a monster, he felt positively lost.

“You know the best way to see the galaxy? If you rule it with me,” he teased. She sighed dramatically, grinning as she shook her head. He would die for that smile. “Which one first?”

“What?”

“Which one do you want to see first?” He said, turning back to the heavens, gesturing to the stars.

“That one.” She pointed to the right. He closed his eyes, focusing on their bond. Pushing into her
consciousness, he could see in his mind what she could see. Seeing the galaxy through her eyes, he was able to pinpoint what drew her attention.

“Priate? You just like it because it’s bright, because it’s close…”

“I want to go to a planet there,” she said with a smile.

He snorted to suppress a chuckle. “The only planet we could land on is Mustafar, and I doubt you want me going there.”

“Why not?”

“That would be the location of Darth Vader’s castle.” He must have sounded reverent, because his words earned a raised eyebrow.

“Of course it is,” she groaned. “How many times have you been there?”

The memories of Sidious’s constant reminders that he wasn’t "ready," that he had to shut out the light before he was "worthy" enough to go there, echoed through his thoughts. He shook his head. “Never.”

“What do you think would make you worthy?” Her eyes held only sincerity, as if she cared. She wouldn’t make that mistake again when he told her the truth.

“When I finish what he started,” he replied, as if it were obvious. Restoring his grandfather’s legacy had been his former master’s, and by proxy his, obsession for the last seven years. Kylo had always only been a means to an end for Sidious, he knew that now. His former master needed someone to destroy Luke and the Jedi – to succeed where Anakin had failed. Anakin found the strength to kill his wife, but Kylo would die before he ever let anything happen to his bondmate. It was the one variable Sidious hadn’t accounted for and it had cost him his life. Or at least, Snoke’s life.

Rey studied him for a moment, but she didn’t look angry. There was something in her eyes – something knowing – which didn’t make sense. What did she think she knew about his family – about him – that he didn’t? She grinned, and he wondered if she intended to mock him. “Finish what Vader started – killing thousands in the name of an idea? Or what your grandfather started –
“The ones he loved?” he scoffed. “He couldn’t save the ones he loved. Not from himself. They said he loved her – my grandmother – but in the end, he killed her, like the monster that he was. I bet the legends left that part out.”

“He failed because he turned to darkness to save her. He saved Luke, and himself, by fighting the darkness. I bet Snoke left that part out,” she quipped. “You and your grandfather are not so different after all; you both killed a monster.”

If only she knew, they had both killed the same monster. “Ah yes, compassion has always been my family’s weakness.”

“Or strength...” she grit back. Her frustration with him saturated their connection. “You think Vader’s choice tarnished a legendary life, but I believe that choice made his story worth telling. Do you think your sentimentality was a mistake? Do you wish you had killed me instead?”

He leveled a pointed glare at her, but there was only sincerity over the bond. She looked at him as if she expected an answer. “Rey, that’s one of the only things in my life I don’t regret.”

“Then what do you regret?”

“I regret telling you about Priate,” he mumbled.

“Fine, that one,” she said, pointing to another star nearby.

“That is Naboo, which shares its name with the third world in the system. That world is the homeworld of my grandmother. She and my grandfather were married there. It has the most beautiful gardens and waterfalls in the galaxy.”

“What about that one?” Rey held her finger over a bright star slightly above Naboo – or at least, that’s how it appeared in their sky. Wouldn’t it be fate that she had pointed to the cluster of stars that had begun it all? Kylo knew the stars were systems apart, but that small section of sky Rey was drawn to meant more to the Skywalker bloodline than the entirety of the galaxy.
“That is Tatoo II; Tatoo I is its binary. The first planet in that system is Tatooine. That is the homeworld of my grandfather. And Luke. And where my namesake – of my old name – Ben Kenobi lived in hiding. It seems Jedi are destined to end their days alone on forsaken planets.”

Rey threw up her hands in mock frustration. “I give up.”

“What do you want to see?” He asked, his voice was as gentle as his grasp on her hand. He knew what his former master would have said, what he would have said before now, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care. There was just something about her that changed what was important to him.

“The Kessel Run.”

Of course.

Who could forget the legend of the great smuggler Han Solo, delivering spice to the galaxy, addicting and destroying the minds of millions? He looked past the human and Wookiee slaves whose life expectancy in those mines was a couple of months. The conditions were sickening. But there are no morals where credits are concerned. Of course, he was a hero to the galaxy, and the Republic overlooked it all. Under Kylo’s orders, the First Order had shut the mines down, though he was certain his subordinates would be quick to negotiate a lucrative deal to reinstate operations. Yet somehow, he was the monster.

“It’s not that impressive,” he muttered.

Rey bit her lip, and he was grateful she at least attempted to temper her excitement, but he could feel it over the bond. “Did Han take you? Are the legends about him true?”

“Not you, too,” he groaned with half-hearted indignation. He had forgotten about her obsession with his father.

She nudged him in the ribs with her elbow and smiled. “If you know it’s not that impressive, does that mean you’ve flown it? Did you do it in twelve parsecs, too?”

“I take calculated risks in the cockpit – not reckless ones. The first time he did it, it was a necessity, but after that the danger he added to the mission was unnecessary for the short distance he saved.
He was interested in being the best... the fastest. I think there are more significant marks for determining a good pilot.”

“I would say you are only jealous,” she said, laying her head on his shoulder. It was incredible that she seemed to just fit there… perfectly. He wondered if she felt that, too. His attention was drawn back to her when she continued, “but if Poe believes you are a 'formidably skilled opponent,’ then you must have inherited at least one of those Solo piloting genes.”

“I do what I need to do when it counts.” Kylo bit back a smile, but he knew she could feel it over the bond. There was very little he could hide from her. It still terrified him sometimes, but not like it had before, and not for the same reasons, either.

“Don't let it go to your head, flyboy,” she said with a gentle squeeze of his hand. It seemed almost unintentional, and he wondered if she had even realized she had done it. Did she have any idea what it did to him – those small gestures that were likely inconsequential to her? “So, did you do it?”

“Hmm?”

“The Kessel Run,” she laughed. “Did you do it?”

He snorted. “I’m better at blowing things up.”

"See, you and Poe have something in common,” she said brightly. He hummed. Of course they did – more than she realized. “But you never answered my question, did you?”

“I wouldn’t smuggle that poison in the first place,” he mumbled. Her reaction wasn’t quite what he expected. Her side of the bond rippled with mirth. Her amused voice bounced around his mind.

You have the most skewed moral compass of anyone I have ever met.

“You’re projecting again, Rey.”

“I’m not sorry,” she laughed into his shoulder.
“And I did fly it – once – and did it in less than twelve parsecs. I was young and foolish and wanted to impress him. I nearly got us all killed. But the closer you cut to the black holes in the Maw nebulae, the shorter distance you travel. It’s not that spectacular. Here...” he moved their joined hands to the left region of the sky. “Start at Formos and follow this route,” he guided her hand through a slight curve upward to the left. “To Kessel, pick up the precious supply of spice, and back down again cutting right... through... here.” When he lowered their hands and glanced back at her, she had lifted her head to stare at him, not the stars above them. Her face was unreadable, so he dropped her hand and stared down at his feet.

Rey cleared her throat. “You got to see a black hole?”

“I am a black hole,” he muttered.

“I think they're beautiful.”

He tilted his head and raised his eyes to hers, studying her expression after those distracting words. “They are the absence of matter. True nothingness,” he rasped. It didn’t surprise him that he was staring at her again. There was something that drew his gaze to her like a tractor beam. It used to agitate him – how intrigued he was by her – but now he just accepted that this was how he would always be around her. He found a surprising calm every time she held his stare.

“You know that black holes absorb all the light, so you're basically admitting to having powerful light inside you,” Rey said, reminding him of their conversation.

This woman forced him to fight more smiles in an hour than he had felt in his entire life. “You forgot the part about destroying everything around me.”

“No one knows what happens in a black hole.” She crinkled her nose; a lesser man would have given up the argument right then and there. “It might not be destroying anything, just soaking up all the light and goodness.”

“But it literally disintegrates everything that –”

“Shhh... just accept it for what it is,” she whispered and threaded her fingers through his again. “Where was Alderaan?” He lifted their hands to the furthest left reaches of the night sky.
“Alderaan was right about... there,” he guessed. “It’s a graveyard now. I went there once with Luke, and again with Snoke. It was supposed to make me feel something. I mostly felt numb.”

“If the Empire hadn’t destroyed it, do you think you would have remained the Prince of Alderaan? Do you think you would have become king? Or would you have left for the First Order anyway?” she asked in earnest. He didn’t want to disappoint her, he didn’t want to ruin what they had, but he didn’t fear it as he had before. He had no reason to believe this time would be any different, but everything in him told him it was. This time, he chose to have hope.

“Maybe if I never knew who my grandfather was,” he conceded, “or at least no one else did. If they feared my mother, they would have never let a monster like me rule.”

“You’re not a monster, Ben.”

He hummed, taking her defense of his character as a challenge. Moving their hands slightly lower in the sky, he hesitated over a section of stars that often drew his attention. “That...was Hosnian Prime.” He knew she sensed the slight edge to his voice, but she ignored it.

“That was not your fault,” she breathed, though he wasn’t sure who she was trying to convince.

“The galaxy would disagree with you.” He could sense her disquiet. He was reminding her again that he was not Ben Solo. She knew the things he’d done, yet she made excuses in hope that he fit the narrative of the man she’d created in her head. But seeing the real-world effects of his darkness was difficult to ignore.

When she spoke again, her voice was defeated. “Where is Jakku?”

“Behind you,” he said with a certainty he hoped she felt. He knew what had happened to her there. No matter what befell the Resistance in the war, he would do everything in his power to ensure she never went back there. At least, not permanently. If she wanted to procure her revenge against the thugs who attacked her, then he would respect that. Hell, he would accompany her and watch. He would blow up that entire planet in a heartbeat if she asked. She wouldn’t, of course, but that didn’t change the fact that he would.

Rey smiled. Though he was fairly certain he wasn’t projecting, it was knowing – almost as if she had heard his thoughts.
“If you could go anywhere right now, where would you go?”

Kylo moved their hands back in front of them, hovering over an unassuming star. “Chandrila. My homeworld. The galaxy looked so different from there.”

“Will you take me there?” she asked sleepily as she leaned against his shoulder.

“If the fates allow, I would love nothing more.” Kylo gently pushed on her shoulder until she lay back on the cool stone of the temple. He slumped down next to her. “You should get some rest. Dream of all the worlds you will see when this is over.”

“I don’t want to sleep,” she lamented, turning to face him, “because when I wake up, you won’t be there.”

He hummed, swallowing down his own longing. “That is the nature of the bond.”

“And I’m afraid of what tomorrow will bring,” she said, blinking her eyes to restrain her tears. He sensed the fear in her voice. Did she not trust her friend as absolutely as she had claimed? Or did she fear her friends would carry out their plans to assassinate him?

“The sun will rise whether you want it to or not, Rey.”

“Can we just pretend that it won’t for a few more minutes?” There was an emotion deepening in her eyes, a yearning that he couldn’t comprehend. She wanted him to stay, and even though he did as well, the thought of anyone seeking his company without ulterior motives was a foreign concept to him. What did she want from him? Even if her sole desire was to save him, what did her remaining in his company accomplish?

“Delay the inevitable,” he murmured. “To what end?”

“Happiness.” Kylo was rewarded with another of her world-stopping smiles. She spoke with such certainty that it was difficult not to believe her. “Even if it’s temporary.” He flinched when she reached toward him, running her fingers through his hair. Her touch was both electrifying and calming, which defied basic physics, but so did everything else about their bond. The world around
them disappeared, and all he could do was breathe to avoid drowning in her mesmerizing eyes. She had a power over him that was stronger even than the Force. But she spoke of temporary happiness as if it was easy to let go.

“I know you feel it, too,” she said as her eyes drifted closed. Of course, he did. It overwhelmed his senses and dragged him into a hole even deeper than the darkness ever could. He was a casualty of a war he wasn’t prepared to fight. The fear of his irresistible temptation toward her – toward the light – should have broken through the spell that had crumpled his resistance. It didn’t. All he felt was peace. He knew it was temporary, but for the moment, that was okay.

“Sleep,” he whispered when her eyes, heavy with drowsiness, blinked open.

She shook her head languidly. “I don't want to; I want to stay here with you.”

“Remember the lake?” he asked softly. “Dream of the lake, and you'll find me there.”

“Ben, will you… will you hold me while I fall asleep?”

He nodded. Rey pushed his shoulder and he obligingly rolled onto his back so she could rest her head on his chest. His eyes wandered the vastness of the heavens as her breathing slowed. Fighting the urge to wrap her in his arms, lest he lost himself completely, he allowed his mind to wander to their temporary amicability.

Rey was curled against him for the sole reason that she wanted to be there. This wasn’t about grief or turning him or helping her friends or saving him. He didn’t know why she stayed. A treacherous part of him wanted to believe that she stayed because she cared. Was it possible that she no longer viewed him as an enemy? Were they... friends? It certainly wasn’t everything he wanted, but it would mean everything to him if he earned something from her other than hatred. He knew it was far too much to hope for, but part of him still held onto that foolish hope.

He cursed the Force. What had he done to deserve this? Any of this? The Force created a man to restore balance, led him to a lifetime of destruction on the dark side, then gave three complete strangers heroic destinies to ultimately defeat him. Kylo was the only product of those heroes. He wasn’t what they wanted, but he didn’t ask to be born. He didn’t ask for this...gift.

Someone like him shouldn’t have had the Force. But the Force wanted him, so he had trusted it to guide him. And where did the Force lead him? Down the same path as his grandfather. He knew
now that he was destined to be the end of a legendary bloodline. He could accept that, but why would the Force introduce him to her? Why would it give him this torturous glimpse into what could have been – everything he could have ever wanted – when he was never given a choice? He wished he had never been born. The galaxy would have been better for it. Rey would have been better for it.

As her hand slid up his chest, however, he wasn’t so certain anymore.

“Will you stay with me all night?” She asked, ghosting her fingertips in circles over his skin. He swallowed nervously. There was nothing he would rather do.

*It will tear you apart when this ends,* he reminded himself. *You won’t survive losing her.* Kylo couldn’t find it in himself to care.

“I will stay with you as long as I can,” he whispered. “But I don’t control the Force.”

Kylo held her as she grew heavy with sleep. As he listened to the steady rhythm of her breathing, for once he didn’t fear what the morning would bring. He refused to rest his own eyes, because he couldn’t remember the last time he had felt so content.
Chapter End Notes

Conversation about death
Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Rey opened her eyes to a bright blue sky, the warmth of the sun on her face, and something soft and cool underneath her. Sitting up, her eyes settled on a familiar sight. It was as smooth as ice, enchantingly clear, and strong with vibrations of the Force. It warmed her soul, sparking feelings of peace and happiness that made her never want to leave.

"Lake Andrasha," a voice rumbled behind her. She smiled as his familiar energy enveloped her. This lake she had seen in dreams – he knew of it. Had she only been a witness of his dreams? Or were they connected in this place somehow? It didn’t terrify her as it should have. She no longer feared the strength of their bond. Every connection between them was tense with danger as they risked chance of discovery from both sides, but here, this was a place safe for them to meet. A secret. *Theirs.*

The sun reflected off the crystals lining its depths, sparkling like underwater stars. "Ben, it's beautiful," she breathed. It was mesmerizing, but she found her gaze drawn to the man behind her. When she turned, she was almost surprised to find him there. Her heart fluttered. The lake wasn’t the only thing mesmerizing in its beauty. There was no sign of the Supreme Leader in him as he stared out at the water, eyes bright in the sun, hair gently blowing in the breeze.

"It's my favorite place in the galaxy."

Rey remembered his preoccupation with a lake in his memories. He had hidden from the voices there as he curled up next to the shore and slept. *Dreamed.* Was this the place his mind returned for comfort? She remembered the nightmares she witnessed, when was the last time he had found this place in sleep? "This is the lake, the one from your childhood," she said, wishing she understood how it fit in the puzzle of their bond. "It's like a dream."

"Technically, it *is* a dream," he chuckled. "Let me show you something." Without hesitation, he grasped her hand and led her down to the water. Stealing a glance up at him, she found his expression was soft and content in a way she had never seen before. She had never seen him so... unburdened. He still wore his dark tunic and trousers, but he seemed lighter. Was this truly him? Or what he could be? Or what she wanted him to be? Was he even there at all? She knew it was a dream, but she could have stayed in that place forever.

They removed their boots and sat near the water's edge, letting the warm water caress their feet. It all felt so real. “There's...energy in the water.”

"It's the Kyber crystals at the bottom of the lake," he explained, "I used to come here to
escape...away from disappointing my father...away from scaring my mother...away from Snoke's voice in my head, which disappeared when I came here...It was the closest I have ever been to happy here. I would sit here and practice my manipulation of the Force with the water until I fell asleep.” He waved his hand gently over the lake and a cone of water reached up toward his fingers. He twisted and manipulated it until it broke free of the surface tension of the lake. It bounced together into a bubble of water in mid-air. He moved his hands around the bubble, stretching and collapsing it. She was captivated by the way the sunlight refracted through the water bubble and created colorful beams of light.

"Open your hands," he whispered." Rey stared into his eyes as she silently complied. When he manipulated the water bubble over her upturned palms, she felt the warmth of his energy. The light. It was as powerful as she had felt in his memories. This wasn’t the man she knew and it hurt more than she ever imagined to admit it. It's just a dream, Rey, she reminded herself. He’s not really here.

Kylo held the sphere of water in front of her as she manipulated it with the Force. Though it was new and strange, it didn't seem abstract and fantastical like her dreams usual did. His energy seemed too strong for a dream. She tried to concentrate on the beauty in her hands, but she was too focused on the light in him. It wasn’t until he released the water gently so she could feel the ever-changing energy that she allowed herself to bask in his light. She felt her own light mix with the energy in the sphere and felt the currents combine in a melody she could feel in her soul. His breath hitched and her gaze found his again. He felt it too. When he released the energy in his distraction, she let the water slip away between her fingers.

"Ben, is this real?"

"I don't know how this works. It's as real as you want it to be, I guess,” he said dismissively and flopped back onto the grass. Rey watched him for a moment, but his expression was guarded. Perhaps this was her bondmate. She tentatively rested her head down next to his. He used his hands to manipulate a wave to roll over them, but instead of crashing upon them, it hovered above their heads. The light of the sun shimmered through water, creating bursts of color around them. She put her hands up to help him hold it; something Rey knew she hadn't learned how to do. Was anything possible in this world? Was that how Kylo could use light without consequence?

Something changed as she held up the water. She felt… different. When she turned her head to the side to look at her bondmate, he seemed different too. “This is the first time in my entire life that I have been able to share this with anyone,” he said.

“Ben Solo! Don’t you get her wet,” someone warned behind them. “You don’t want to face the bride’s wrath by getting their only groomswoman’s dress dirty.” They both sat up under the sparkling water and turned toward the voice. Rey caught sight of a glimmer at her waist and realized she was wearing a dress. It was green, and the material was delicate and thin. She had
never worn a dress before. This must be his dream.

“Maz?”

“You best get a move on, child,” she said, eying her bondmate with irritation. “You have that important meeting which you cannot be late for, and dear Rey has to put out all of those pre-celebration fires.”

“I can’t even escape meetings in my dreams,” he grumbled.

“And Rey,” Maz shouted down the hill. “Your friends are running late, so they may need help setting up as well. I don’t trust the droids to set up by themselves.”

“Finn and Rose,” she whispered.

“This must be your dream,” he murmured back.

“Devis ready, so I sent him to fetch the rings” Maz continued. “Hopefully Poe has them, but we can’t find him. He might be with the others in Hanna City at the Senate House.”

“Dev? So this is your dream,” Rey giggled.

Her bondmate’s attention was elsewhere. “What are they doing there?”

“Do you know the place?”

“Well, you could say that,” he grumbled in irritation, “I’ve been to that senate house with my mother more times than I can count. I hate it all. They claim to represent the civilizations of the galaxy, but they exude ostentatious pretension. The entire place smells of avarice and vanity. Every bill that passes through the Senate, projecting the betterment of the galaxy, belies their true greed-driven, self-indulgent intentions. At least, it did, because the Senate was destroyed on Hosnian Prime.”
“You forgot the part where the Chandrila Senate House in Hanna City became the interim capital of the rebuilding of the Republic Systems Alliance, as it had been for the New Republic after the Galactic Civil War,” Maz cackled with a tone that implied it was both a surprising revelation and common knowledge he should have known.

“What is the Republic Systems Alliance?” Rey asked the older woman. There was a knowing smile on the woman’s lips that unnerved her.

“There is no Republic Systems Alliance,” he answered. “There is no Republic.”

“Tell that to your friends, Ben Solo.” Cane pointed at him in challenge, Maz stared him down, daring him to argue.

“What business do they have at the Senate house?”

“They arranged for young Solo’s meeting with the council to coincide with this hearing. Admiral Dameron invited Finn and Rose to speak in front of the new Senate of the Republic Systems Alliance concerning the events that had transpired during the fall of the First Order. They were supposed to have plenty of time before the wedding, unfortunately, it’s running past schedule.”

“The fall of the...” Her bondmate seemed… terrified. “Maz, none of that happened.”

“Oh, dear boy. You have your father’s heart, but also his fear of the unexplainable,” she replied, which did nothing to ease the fear Rey felt emanating from her bondmate. “I thought you would understand better than anyone; time is relative, my dear. I'll see you two at the wedding.”

Maz disappeared over the hill, but the tension didn’t ease with her departure. Rey waited for him to say something, anything, but he remained silent. He lay back and continued manipulating the water above their heads, lost to his thoughts. “Ben?”

“It’s just a dream.”

“Of course, it is,” she replied, and, just like that, the dream changed again. The fancy dress was gone, and she felt the weight of the galaxy again. He must have felt the change as well, because he turned to look at her. Noticing that the dream had returned to what it had been before seemed to ease his agitation.
After a moment, she spoke up again. "I can imagine you lying here as a child and practicing this."

"It was one of my favorite escapes," he replied. When Rey pictured him – dark curls flopping in his eyes as he manipulated the water over his head – he was no older than five. His laugh, his smile, the brightness in his eyes – it seemed more like a memory than imagination. Was it his memory? Or was it just her naïve hope that the darkness hadn’t always held him tightly in its clutches. Rey would have given every last portion to have five minutes with that little boy. Could she have saved him? Was there anything she could have said that would have given hope when there was none? Perhaps she would have taken him far away from Sidious, his family and the politics of the Core Worlds and given him the chance he deserved. It seemed like a far simpler task than picking up the pieces of a broken man.

Rey couldn’t stand to imagine it any further. "What were your other escapes?"

"It's been so long since I thought about it," he whispered. Rey nodded, biting back the tears she knew would inevitably fall. Tears were a luxury she hadn’t had for most of her life. When her only focus was to survive; hope was all she had to hold onto, and tears could easily lead to dehydration. Now she was healthier, physically stronger, safer than she had ever been, but the tears were unbidden. She shed tears for herself – tears of loneliness and isolation. She shed tears for her friends – tears of fear and helplessness as the galaxy crumbled to war around them. She shed tears for the people she’d lost – mourning some, condemning others. But mostly, she shed tears for him. Today she would cry for the man he never got to be. Kylo seemed to sense her sorrow and broke the silence to distract her. "I had a few escapes," he said. "I liked things that would get me out of my own head; dejarik… practicing piloting the Falcon... reading...calligraphy..."

"Calligraphy?" she asked, her sorrow momentarily forgotten as she dried her tears with the back of her hand. Turning to gauge his expression, she found a flicker of embarrassment in his eyes. It was the truth. It faded quickly to something far more sobering as he searched her face. His brows pinched in concern. She could map every tear track on her cheeks by the path his gaze followed as he memorized them. It upset him – that she was crying – and she wondered if he knew it was because of him. If he had opened himself to embarrassment in hope of comforting her, it had worked. A smile slowly lifted her lips as she imagined him scrolling beautiful words across parchment. “I have so many questions.”

Kylo’s face softened in response. Rey was certain he would avoid any further mention of it. Perhaps the dream left him feeling less vulnerable, or perhaps his desire to dry her tears was stronger than any embarrassment her felt from the admission, but he surprised her by continuing. "Yes, my mother taught me. Well, she had someone teach me. My mother saw to it that I was raised with an emphasis on education and culture as if I were a Prince of Alderaan. It was important to her that I was taught Alderaanian dances, pretentious languages, calligraphy, hair braiding... all the ancestral royal customs. She thought it would keep me busy when they were away.”
Rey’s interest had caught on two words, interrupting all other thoughts with increasingly humorous images. She smirked. “Hair braiding?"

“Force, you have no idea the intricacies behind hair braiding,” he grumbled. “Each braid means something different; there are customs about braiding someone’s hair or especially taking it out. It’s complicated.”

She reached up to trace her fingers over the intricate plait Leia had tenderly weaved into her hair. “What does my braid mean?”

“Forgiveness,” he answered vaguely, without more than a glance toward her hair to study what his mother had delicately placed there. “And, yes, she absolutely knew what she was doing.”

“What did your mother's mean?”

He puffed out his cheeks, blinking more than necessary, but he surprised her by answering. “It's worn during times of grief or separation.”

Rey’s fingers slid down through the tangles in the unbraided sections of her hair. The last time a mother figure had fixed her hair, she had left it styled that way for nearly a decade and a half. What Leia had done meant far more to her, but she couldn’t do that to herself again. It was time to move on. “Will you braid my hair?” she asked softly. “Something with a different meaning?”

“You’re only supposed to have someone you trust braid your hair.” He didn’t shake his head, or tell her "no," but the way he said it was with finality, as though trust between them was inconceivable. He didn’t trust her; she knew that. And though there was part of her that trusted him – the part that allowed him to see a side of her no one else had– she didn’t trust him completely. She feared trusting him when the bond closed and he slid that mask over his face. She feared trusting him with the lives of her friends. She feared trusting him not to break her heart again.

“What about taking it out?”

Kylo studied her quietly with an expression she couldn’t quite place, then shook his head. “For Alderaanians, it is the most intimate thing you can do. My father used to do it for my mother every night.”
“Apparently, they didn't have Force bonds,” she said, nudging him with her shoulder.

He huffed a near chuckle, but there was something other than mirth in his stare. “No, I suppose not.”

His focus swiftly shifted back to the beauty above them, and she allowed her own eyes to drift to the sparkling water. He was manipulating the energy to create currents, causing the light to refract differently as it moved. Rey lifted her hand to watch the beautiful colors dance over her skin. Smiling, she turned to follow the colors that glimmered over her bondmate. The red stained his hand like blood, the orange, yellow and green brightened his dark attire, and the blue climbed upward across his scar. She would have never imagined when she carved that wound with her blade that they would be anything but contentious. Only two days before finding herself in this dream, she would have never imagined this amity – this warmth – between them. That was the problem, though, wasn’t it? This was all a dream. It was nice to imagine for a moment that it wasn’t. “Well, if you won't braid my hair, will you write something in a beautiful language for me?”

His hand abruptly stalled in its gentle flourishes and she wondered what about her question shocked him. “What would you have me write?”

Tentatively, she touched the hovering water with her fingertip. It rippled. “Surprise me.”

“Okay, I will.”

There was something hopeful in his tone. She could feel his smile across the bond but didn’t turn to see it. She didn’t want to break the fragile moment. Instead, she returned the conversation to safer territory. “Did she teach your father, too? I can’t imagine Han Solo writing calligraphy.”

“Absolutely not,” he said, clearly amused by her suggestion. “There was no room in his life for that. Or the Force. No matter what my mother did, there was absolutely no civilizing my father. His only concession was that he would dance with her – not the formal Alderaanian dances – but I think that was one of her favorite things about him. It was her way of proving she had tamed the rogue.”

“Well, I think calligraphy has to be my new favorite thing I've learned about you.” She wondered how long it had been since he had practiced. There were no personalized items in his quarters and she imagined that old-fashioned writing instruments were not likely readily available on a star
destroyer. The only calligraphy set she had ever seen was in a chest… in the basement of Maz’s
castle… on Takodana… with his uncle’s lightsaber. “Ben, whose calligraphy set was in that chest
on Takodana with Luke’s lightsaber?”

“My grandfather’s lightsaber,” he corrected. “Everything in that chest was mine. I told you that
lightsaber belonged to me. I gave it to my… to Lando, to keep it safe, but he gave it to Maz to hide
from me after I joined Snoke.”

“You know Maz? Then why –”

“Okay, Rey, now it's your turn,” he said as he moved his fingers and the water vibrated in return.
The movement caught the light of the sun and it temporarily blinded her. “What did you do as an
escape?”

“Well, I mostly just learned how to build things... but I also studied alien languages and the
schematics for starships, and I ran flight simulators to learn how to fly from a downed Y-wing
bomber.”

“No wonder you're good at everything,” he murmured. It sounded surprisingly sincere. It was an
odd sentiment from a man who had called her “nothing,” and claimed she needed a “teacher.” Did
Kylo view her in a different light than she had always assumed? She would have asked him, if he
hadn’t spoken first. “But that’s practical. What did you do as an escape?”

“I guess... I had a doll I made from a flightsuit and a rebellion helmet that belonged to someone
named Captain Raeh. I used to wear the helmet and play with the doll and pretend I was part of the
Rebel Alliance. I pretended my parents left to fight a war far away and I found them on one of my
missions after I joined. I imagined I found them hiding in the desert and we hugged and cried and
promised to never leave each other again. I imagined winning the war and coming home to them
and listening to them tell me how proud of me they were for becoming a rebellion hero.” Rey
turned to Kylo when he made a noise in his throat. The sound was more animal than human. He
wasn’t looking at her, but his jaw was clenched tight. Was he angry because she mentioned the
rebellion? “I also counted the stars. And wondered which star was closest to my parents.
Sometimes I would pretend they had moved to a closer star each night. I still think about –”

“I used to count the stars too,” he said, his voice was low and bitter. Rey didn’t understand what
had antagonized him, but there was no doubt he was angry. This concerned far more than her
childhood fantasy of joining the rebellion. “But I wasn’t a slave, starving on a forsaken planet,
sentenced to that fate by my junkie parents who were buried a few kilometers from where I slept.
They don’t deserve another second of your thoughts. Rey knew he was angry, but she had never
heard his voice so cold. She turned to him, releasing her control of the water above them, so he
allowed the wave to crash upon them.
“Ben!”

Rey’s eyes snapped open, sleep still settled over her features. “Ben?” she whispered. She felt the emptiness in her mind first. She rolled over in her bed. Kylo was no longer beside her. And she was back in the temple room. It wouldn’t have been surprising if she had remembered going back down to her room after they talked on the steps of the temple.

Did he... no, he wouldn’t risk being found by the Resistance to come down here himself.

She might have considered it further if she wasn’t focused on that dream. From start to finish, the dream had been strange. He had seemed more like Ben Solo than she had ever seen him. But the things Maz had said... it terrified him. Did he fear is becoming true? Did he have reason to fear the First Order would fall? Or was it the first time he had ever considered it? Was he even there? Was it real, or was it merely the desire of a little girl in denial with too much hope? It didn’t seem like the man she knew at all. Then again, she didn’t know who her bondmate was anymore. There was a side to him she never imagined. And in her dream, if he was there, if it was real, he seemed almost... happy. At least, he had until the end. She still didn’t understand what had happened. She needed to see him again. Closing her eyes, she attempted to drift back to sleep. But her body was suddenly very awake when she felt a presence.

Is he still here?

Fear pricked the fine hairs on the back of her neck as she realized she sensed two different energies in the room. No one had announced themselves and there was no reason for anyone to be in her room. It was too dark to see them or determine the purpose of the intrusion, but the warning screaming in the Force made it clear she had reason to be concerned. The intruders’ steps were soft, deliberate, as they circled close to the walls to meet at her bed. They moved as if she couldn’t sense them – or they believed her to be asleep. Even though they were holding their breaths, she could hear their hearts thundering in the Force.

Rey had faced many predators in her life, she had no doubt the intruders’ intentions were nefarious. Her only fear was what they wanted from her. Surprise was their greatest advantage, so she decided to use it against them. If they would force her to engage them, then she would draw them in close. She listened to her own unsteady breathing as she waited for the inevitable. Seconds stretched like hours. The tension around her was palpable; her nerves were pulled taut, ready to snap. She nearly cried in relief when a familiar presence suddenly invaded her thoughts.

Are you okay? his voice echoed in her mind. It was unsettling how strong the bond had become. He had somehow sensed her fear. Though she was initially relieved, she knew that situation would
become exponentially worse if he was there.

She blocked his energy from her mind to the best of her abilities. There was a far more pressing problem that she had to direct her focus. The sound of squeaking boots reverberated off the stone floor, drawing closer. She slowly straightened up in bed, searching the dark room for a weapon. Her eyes fell on her staff just as a blue arc of electricity shattered the darkness in front of her. She cried out as a sudden flash of pain jolted through her. Her teeth clenched as her body went rigid in paralysis.

Rey?

Panic trembled in Kylo’s voice. She wanted to reassure him, or close herself off from the bond, but she wasn’t strong enough to do anything but writhe against the currents still crashing through her system. All at once, she was ripped from her bed by two large men, but Rey was not one to be kidnapped willingly. She screamed as she fought the weakness in her limbs. The paralysis interrupted her connection to the Force, and she was unable to will it away. She struggled under their grasp, but she was too numb to even kick out at them. She screamed at them to release her, threatening the use of the Force she couldn’t manipulate.

Biting and scratching, she snarled like a wounded, feral animal. Undeterred, they pulled her out into the hallway, and she recognized them as members of the Resistance. The fight in her died as her anger was swallowed by confusion. She focused the Force to restore the sensation in her body. They dragged her down a long corridor and into the war room… to a waiting Poe Dameron.

"Get your hands off me!" she screamed, shoving one of them away with the Force. The other Resistance member lifted his blaster rifle and aimed it at her. She turned her focus on the general. "Is this entirely necessary?"

"Please, don't hurt her!" Finn begged from behind the kidnapper, grasping the man’s shoulder to redirect his aim. Grim understanding finally clicked in her mind then. It had only been a few short hours since the last time she had seen her best friend, but after everything that had happened since then, it felt like days. The confrontation between Finn and Kylo had nearly become deadly, her friend had become more unhinged than she had ever seen him, Kylo had even warned her about the repercussions, and yet, she still hadn’t seen this coming. She had wholeheartedly believed that her friend would never betray her. She thought she would have to face his disappointment with the rise of the sun, but not this. There was only one reason why she had been dragged out of her bed.

Rey glared at him furiously. She trusted him. He hadn’t even waited to talk to her. How could he do this to her? How could he betray her – to Poe Dameron? There was conflict in his eyes, but it only confirmed what he had done. She hardened her voice so he wouldn’t hear the tears that threatened to spill over. “You told them.”
Rey! she heard Kylo’s voice again. His presence pried at her mind, desperately clawing at the bond like a frenzied beast, trying to get through to her. His fear resonated through their connection, crashing into her own.

Poe was just as relentless. “Tell me now, or, so help me, Rey, I'll execute you for treason. Leia's not here to help you this time.”

"Then how… was he in… your room?" Poe’s voice was a low growl. He glared at her as if she were Snoke himself, all his willpower consumed with finding a reason not to pull the trigger.

It was the moment of truth. She had been running from it her entire life. If there was one thing Leia had taught her, it was that she should have trusted her sooner. It was time to face her fears again. "He was not actually there, Poe. He just... appears to me... sometimes. Neither of us has control over it. The Force brings us together against our will. We haven’t figured out how to stop it yet. It was something Snoke created to draw me into a trap. Obviously, that didn't go as planned. I went to Ahch-To for Luke's help, but he refused. Kylo was there for me when Luke wasn’t. That was why I went to him on the Supremacy, to turn him. Last night, he appeared to me after his mother died, but he was still on the Finalizer the whole time."

Her words did nothing to alleviate Poe’s agitation. “So you lied to me,” he said. It wasn’t a question. His face was twisted with disgust, as if she were a piece of garbage littering the floor he walked on. “You lied about going to the Supremacy, you lied about that night I heard voices in your room, you lied yesterday about your cape in the forest, you lied about the kiss... all you've done is lie to us. And you expect me to believe a word you say now?”

Rey tilted her chin higher in defiance. “Yes.”
“And when were you planning on mentioning this to the Resistance?” he hissed. There was a darkness that surrounded his usual faint signature in the Force. *Rage.* “He’s our enemy, Rey! He’s not some lowly stormtrooper; he’s leader of the *entire* First Order! And you have been communicating with him the whole time! You have a relationship our enemy! I have no choice but to assume that you revealed sensitive information about the Resistance. This is Treason, Rey!”

Rey panicked. This hadn’t gone the way she had thought. The words were falling off her tongue before she could consider them. “Leia knew!”

"I’m sure she was thrilled.” His mocking tone was sharp and sarcastic, almost petulant. The others in the room had their weapons trained on her, waiting for his command, as if *she* were the enemy. She had no doubt they would kill her if she didn't find a reason for Finn discovering the Supreme Leader in her room. So she lied. Rey did not have much experience with military discourse, so she delved deep in her experience with her bondmate to deliver her most believable tactical summarization.

“My communication with him was Leia’s idea. She was made aware of the bond when I was on Ahch-To. She believed Kylo Ren could be turned and tasked me with a mission to form a rapport with him and push for his defection. He has emotional weaknesses that Snoke did not possess and has revealed a disenchantment with the First Order. The greatest obstacle I have faced in my mission is that he believes his second-in-command, the one responsible for Hosnian Prime, would take drastic measures if he defected. But I believe now he can be turned. We have an undeniable opportunity to dismantle the First Order from the inside if I can turn him. I just need more time.” Her eyes burned daggers into Finn's to threaten his silence, both knowing her words were a lie, but he looked away.

Catching her glare, Poe refocused his suspicion on Finn. “And why didn't she tell me any of this?”

“It was classified as 'need to know,' and you didn't,” Rey spat acerbically.

Poe clicked the safety off the blaster. “You lying traitor...”

Finn must have feared Poe's volatility. “It's true!” he shouted, jumping between them. “I... I knew about it, too.” And just like that, Finn had committed treason for her. It made no sense, he was the one who betrayed her in the first place. If their lie was discovered, the Resistance would kill him, too. It should have left her grateful to know that part of him was still loyal to her, or angry that he had forced her into that situation, but she only felt regret and shame that she had dragged someone she loved into her mess. Since the confrontation, she had only considered her trust in him, not the trust he’d had in her. He felt just as betrayed But he hadn’t abandoned her when she needed him.
Poe considered the new information for a moment before continuing the interrogation with a predatory focus in his eyes. She tried with everything in her to maintain eye contact to prove she had nothing to hide. His mind was three steps ahead, not only processing the information and determining its validity, but creating a strategy that best suited the needs of the Resistance. He may not have been a Force-sensitive, but he was a force to be reckoned with. “Is it true that you can hurt him through this bond?”

What else did Finn tell him?

"I was able to will a droid part to hit him," she confessed with great reluctance, fearful of the direction the conversation had turned, of what he would ask her to do. "But my blaster was ineffective against him, and I do not have a lightsaber."

That–apparently–was the wrong answer. The distrustful ire lay heavy on his words. "Where is the lightsaber? With him?"

"Not that it's any of your concern," she said through gritted teeth, “but it was broken in Snoke's throne room after Ben killed him to save my life.” Let him be angry. She had spent her entire life under someone else's control; she bowed to no one.

"Not any of my..." he started, but his head tilted, and he blinked as if his mind had caught on a single word. A dangerous look passed over his face. “Ben? You mean Kylo Ren, don’t you? Our enemy?” He scoffed derisively. “Careful, Rey; it almost sounds like you have compassion for this monster.” The resentment tightened in her chest. She could sense the darkness tempting her. 

Careful, Poe; it would be too easy to summon that blaster from your hand.

Poe turned his attention to Finn. “Do you hear this, Colonel? Can we trust her with our lives? With your fiancée’s life? Has she been compromised? What did you see or hear when you entered the room last night?” Finn glanced at her nervously, his face painfully conflicted, but Poe stepped between them, blocking his view of her.

"Ren was half-dressed, and she had her arms around him when I walked in," Finn reported, his lips curled as if the words themselves were bitter. “It looked...intimate. Too comfortable for enemies. He and I both drew our weapons. She defended him by disarming me of my blaster. I think... she has been manipulated by Ren. She believes his lies. But I don't think she would ever intentionally do anything to hurt us.” A tear slipped down his cheek. Rey couldn't fault him for his honesty. His
words spoke of more confidence in her than she had given him reason to have. But, truth or not, he had endangered both her and Kylo's life by confiding in Poe. That wouldn't be so easily forgiven. Poe moved from between them, but Finn refused to meet her piercing stare.

_You know what you did. You signed our death warrants. After he spared your life._

“He promised he wouldn't hurt you, and I trusted him! If he wanted you dead, you wouldn't be standing here, Finn!” She had said it before considering the implications, but once the words left her lips, she knew she had revealed too much.

“Oh, so Snoke's rabid weapon does your bidding now?” Poe chuckled darkly. “Are you his new master? Or do you expect us to believe he actually cares for you?” The way he said it reminded her of a time Kylo stood before her with the same arrogant look upon his face, insinuating she was nothing. _You? A scavenger?_

Finn stepped forward, attempting to deescalate the situation. "Kylo Ren cares for no one – not even his own parents who loved him. Don't forget that, Rey."

He was so certain of his truth that, for a moment, Rey wondered if he could be right. Kylo had called her nothing. He had tried to kill her. He had shut her out and was prepared to never speak to her again. He was actively trying to kill them all. Finn had known him for years, and she, only a couple weeks. Weeks of harsh words in unending arguments. When he wasn’t holding her in his arms, it was easy to convince herself that it was all a ploy to gain her trust. It was easier to convince herself, because it would be easier if it was true.

What if Finn _was_ right? After all she had done to Kylo, how could he care? That small voice inside her that had been screaming to trust him for weeks refused to be silenced, however. This one was not as persuasive as the darkness – as Snoke – but it still guided her to the truth. Kylo _did_ care for her, if not now, then before on Ahch-To. He had only ever been honest with her on the island. She had felt his conflicted emotions on the _Supremacy_, before he felt she betrayed him, and the rare moments since when he allowed a short glimpse into his soul. His feelings had reflected hers when he lowered his mental barriers the previous night. He had held her, comforted her, but never lied, even if it would have been easier. He spared her friend. And the dream... what if it _was_ real? Her friends had been wrong about her, what if they were wrong about him too?

Rey still hadn't sorted through the complicated emotions to understand exactly what it was she felt for him, and in what capacity, but she knew she cared for him. She wouldn't have been so angry with him for choosing power if she didn't. Finn may have known him for years, but had he _truly_ known him like she did? He hadn’t seen Kylo’s memories; he didn’t understand Kylo as she did. If Kylo didn't care, then what had she felt from him? Why would he risk his own life to help her? He had gained nothing in return for his treason, not even her gratitude. Her heart told her that
she wasn’t a fool for believing in him, and if she couldn’t trust that, then what could she trust?

"He's not who you think he is," she whispered. When Poe raised his eyebrows mockingly, she feared his retaliation if she attempted to persuade him further. What could she say without revealing the depths of their complicated – and, admittedly, treasonous – connection? Regardless, he was steadfast in his judgment of Kylo and didn't trust her, so there was little she could do to alter his perception.

They will only ever see him for the wrongs he has done. No one will give him a chance to see what is in his heart. I was no better, and I was connected to him. How can I expect them to see what I refused to see when it was right in front of me?

She lowered her eyes to the stone floor. “I believe with more communication that he can be turned.”

“Rey,” Poe said, lowering his weapon when she glanced up at him. Shaking his head, he softened his voice to a sympathetic tone. "No more chances. He had his chance to turn when he killed Snoke, but he tried to kill us instead. He almost did, if not for you. I don't understand your need to turn him after what you watched him do to his own father, but I get that the thought of his death might affect you because of your ‘bond.’ It's like junking your fighter after spending hours trying to save it. Except, you know, if the fighter was a mass murderer. It's too damaged, and there comes a moment when you finally realize that there's nothing more you can do, but it's still hard to give up. I think if there was a mission for Leia as you say, you got too close. Your bond has clouded your ability to see him for what he actually is, not just what he is around you.”

Before she could respond, he raised his hand in the ubiquitous demand for silence. “Listen, Finn and I think he's manipulating you. He will use you to further his desire for galactic domination. But I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt right now, so hear me out. 'Ben' is the holoposter child for the emotionally unstable – always has been. I don't doubt you've seen him vulnerable, but, at the end of the day, he is still the leader of an army that wants to destroy us. What I am saying, Rey, is a man can cry because his mother is dead and still be the sole reason she died in the first place. He can be broken and lost and lonely. He can be gentle or regretful with you and still march back to the bridge of the Finalizer the second you're gone and order the genocide of an entire system. He can have every emotional weakness that makes a conflicted man and still run his lightsaber through every single last one of us. He can be whatever you think he is with you, and still be exactly what we all believe him to be – a murderer intent upon eliminating us. It is my job to ensure that doesn't happen. So I want you to consider my next question carefully, because this is the only part that matters – Will he surrender or swear allegiance to the Resistance? Right now?"

Even if he would surrender, Rey found that she would not allow it. She knew that if he did swear his allegiance to the Resistance that very moment, Poe would never give him the chance to prove himself. There was no doubt in her mind that her general would kill her bondmate. Poe was right;
he had done truly terrible things, but she couldn't fathom the thought of losing him. If he died at the hands of people she thought of as family, she could never look at them the same way again. She would have to walk away from the Resistance, and, whether or not she wanted to be their last hope, she knew they needed her. She fought the tears that threatened to expose her. “No, he won't. And I don't blame him.”

His demeanor instantly transformed at her words, the fire in his eyes returning. "Then he is exactly who I think he is,” he sneered, “our enemy. An enemy who could be dead right now, without your interference. Let me make this clear for you – your mission has changed. Kylo Ren cannot be turned, because he cannot be trusted. We will use your bond to our advantage. You will call him here, and he will be charged for war crimes. Or... you will be. Either you're with him or us. It's that simple." She felt agitation radiate across the bond. Was he angry she shut him out? Or had something happened to him as well? She hoped whatever was happening to Kylo, he stayed far away.

“Poe, it's not that simple. The Force –”

"Where do your loyalties lie, Rey?” Poe leaned against the wall of the war room, arms crossed. "If you're with us, then you are fundamentally and ethically against everything that creature represents. If you're with him, your supposed 'assignment,' then you're implicitly against us. Choose."

*Why! Why does it have to be us against him? Why can’t I have both?*

Poe stepped forward and raised the weapon to her head. “The First Order or the Resistance. Your life or his. Final warning.”

“Poe! We're all on the same side here,” Finn pleaded with their general to see reason. When Poe didn’t so much as blink in response, Finn turned her instead. “Please, Rey!”

"I choose the Resistance,” she whispered. "But don't you dare ask me to kill him.”

“I would never ask you to do that.” It should have been reassuring, but his words were emotionless. Cold. I would never trust you, his eyes told her. I’ll kill him myself. “Call him here over your little Force link, tell him whatever lie you want. Tell him we want to discuss negotiations to surrender, tell him you want to continue your... relations from last night, tell him you love him for all I care, but get him here.” Tears burned in her eyes as she imagined Kylo falling by her friends' hands, deceived by the one person he trusted enough to open himself to that betrayal. Execution for treason would have been a kinder fate than having to look him in the eyes as he realized she was responsible for his death.
Please, don't make me do this. I will never forgive you.

“Call him here!” Poe's eyes were wild with rage as he jammed his blaster against her temple. She had no doubt he would pull the trigger. Kylo was right. Poe's only allegiance was to the Resistance, and once she was viewed as a threat to their operation, she had become expendable. “Now!”

“Ben...” she said to the temple room, fearing that the Force would hear her call and bring him to her. If he could hear her, she had to say something that would warn him of the danger without alerting Poe to her deception. “Ben, I need you. It's urgent. A matter of life or death. I hate to do this, but I have to ask you to come to me,” Poe eyed her suspiciously. “You have experience with this, Luke taught you that night at the temple. There are certain matters you explained last night that I am beginning to understand. I'll listen now. Trust me. Please, Ben.”

The moment she finished, Poe wrapped his arm around her and put his hand over her mouth, aiming the blaster toward the empty sections of the room, scanning methodically for her bondmate. She could have fought him, but could she fight them all?

“If he doesn't show, I'll know you warned him,” he whispered in her ear. She wondered how long she could pretend she had actually contacted Kylo before she was thrown in a holding cell or executed. It was preferable to the thought of what would happen if Kylo didn't understand her furtive warning. Poe would kill him if he was careless. And if Kylo understood her warning and still revealed himself... she was the only one standing between her friends and certain death. She had trusted him not to hurt Finn the night before, but could she trust him if they tried to kill him?

Or her?

The room had originally been a celebration hall, nearly three times the size they needed for the war room. They had a limited supply of glowrods, which were only affixed to the torch sconces located around the long, makeshift table. The other two-thirds of the room was cast in darkness. There were only six members in the room – herself, Poe, Finn, the newly restored Beebee, and the two guards that dragged her there.

All weapons were aimed toward the void in the dark. Their eyes and the shadows played tricks on them as they searched for movement. Rey begged the Force to keep Kylo as far away from her as possible for his sake and the others she cared for in the room. She couldn't bear to be thrown in the middle again, asked to choose between two lives that she valued the most. They had been lucky the previous night. She wasn't naïve enough to believe it could end well with Poe in the mix.
She wanted to warn him through the bond, but she feared that even if he did hear her warning, their connection would bring them together against their will. There was no vibration in the Force, the sound in the room never faded, there was no slight tug at the base of her neck. But she could still feel him as strongly as she had when she first heard his voice calling her. She waited as fearfully as the rest of them. The only sound was the anxious huff of her breath through her nose, amplified by Poe's hand over her mouth.

It was quiet.

Too quiet.

Then all Hell broke loose.

The crimson light that illuminated the shadows of the dark sent a shiver down her spine the second before she heard the vengeful sparking of its volatile blade.

*Ben, no! Watch out!*

The room was immediately alight with a succession of blaster bolts aimed toward the black shadow. Rey cried out into Poe's palm, too overwhelmed by the thought that Kylo could be killed to fight the general off. But she should have known – Kylo had held his own against three members of the elite Praetorian Guard all at once; of course he could manage four blasters. Each bolt was easily blocked, though she did notice the blade strategically directed them toward the wall rather than back toward her friends. One question had been answered: if the bolts hit the lightsaber, it meant they could hit him. They could kill him.

“Ben, go!” she screamed, but her words were muffled by Poe's hand.

Poe understood quickly that they had not caught him as unawares as they had hoped, so he resorted to a different tactic. “Cease fire!” The others obeyed as he moved her to the center of the room, still separating them from Kylo with the table. He lifted the blaster to her head and depressed the trigger enough to make his warning clear; if Kylo attempted to summon the weapon, he could inadvertently cause it to fire. He could freeze a blaster bolt, but could he do it before it exited the barrel directly into her skull?

“Let her go, Dameron and I'll spare you,” Kylo's deep voice echoed through the darkness. Even if the others in the room were not Force-sensitive, she knew they must feel the intensity of his wrath.
in the Force. If they didn't, they most certainly heard it laced through each word. His threat was clear. If they didn’t do as he commanded, he would kill them.

Poe whispered a directive in her ear and removed his hand from her mouth. “Come into the light, Ben,” she repeated, failing to control the fear trembling in her voice.

Finn parroted her request from somewhere off to her right. “Show yourself, Ren.”

Kylo ignored their commands. She had never felt such unbridled rage from him. Not on Starkiller or Crait, the night she kissed Poe, or the day he shut her out. Poe had threatened her life. While she understood the tactic, she feared Kylo's reaction. He had wiped out an entire civilization when they made vague threats against her life; what would he do to a man who held a blaster to her head?

“Let her go!” he repeated.

Poe was having none of his demands. “Put down the lightsaber, or I shoot her, Ren. And then I’ll throw you in a cell with her corpse!” She knew that Poe would not back down; he was quickly losing control of the situation and was prepared for bloodshed. Was Kylo? Would he do that to her?

Ben, are you there?

Always, his voice rumbled in her mind, though there was a sharpness to it that concerned her.

You have to go; your life is in danger!

It's better than the alternative. She could sense his fear and anger through the bond, but also...betrayal. Why betrayal? She remembered the pointed anger that had pulsated through the bond earlier. What had happened across the galaxy? It wasn't the time to ask, but his mental state concerned her.

They won't hurt me; they're using me to get to you. Please, go. They mean to kill you.

They can try. With that, his mental barriers were raised. He was shutting her out.
Kylo surprised them all by disengaging the lightsaber, casting the room into darkness. It did little to calm the nerves of her companions, however. As frightening as his blood-red blade was to behold, being unable to locate their lethal enemy was far worse. They had fired upon him, they had made it clear they intended to do him harm, and his least favorite person at the Resistance was holding a gun to her head. They had all been witness to or had heard stories of the terror this man could deliver with the Force.

And now he had the advantage.

The only evidence of her bondmate lurking beyond the shadows was the soft reverberation of his boots upon the temple floor. The small hairs prickled on the back of her neck as she held her breath, waiting for the inevitable break in the standoff. She had never been more thankful that he was on her side; she only wished her friends could say the same. She wouldn't let him kill them, but she was at a disadvantage without a lightsaber of her own.

“Ben, don't do this!” she begged. “Show them that you're not the man they think you are! Please, don't hurt them! Just go. I'll be okay!”

“You are exactly who we think you are, aren't you Supreme Leader?” Poe's voice was strong and authoritative in the face of fear, attempting to draw Kylo from the darkness. “Poor Ben Solo – spoiled little rich boy, who had everything anyone else could ever want. It must have been awful to have two of the greatest heroes of the rebellion as parents. It was such a terrible life that he got to train to become a Jedi Knight under Luke Skywalker! But he threw it all away to become everything his family fought to destroy! Isn't that right, Kylo?”

Kylo's answer was surprisingly even and low. “You know nothing about me.”

Poe smiled. “I know whatever is wrong with you is long and difficult to pronounce.”

“Everything is long and difficult to pronounce for someone like you,” came the reply from the darkness. There was something there, a familiarity that Rey expect.

“I know you thought mommy and daddy didn't give you enough attention,” Poe called out, gesturing with his head for Finn direct his aim to the left. Finn stepped forward slowly with his blaster raised as he searched the shadows for his target. Poe shifted his grip on the blaster pressed against her temple. “But I grew up with my parents away a lot too. Why didn't I join the dark side, huh?”
There was only a low growl from the darkness. “Your parents *quit* the rebellion for you; your parents *loved* you.”

Finn moved toward the sound of his voice and Poe pushed Rey so they followed closely behind. “What about Finn or Rey?” Poe said with a feigned calm as he hissed anxious breaths in her ear. “They had no parents. A lot of us here at the Resistance either had parents away fighting against the evil in this galaxy or dying because of it. And look at us: we're not mass murderers.”

“You are,” the darkness answered back. “You just rationalize that the ones you kill are your 'enemy.’”

Poe had been trying to instigate a reaction from Kylo but had become agitated himself. “You killed your father! Your mother! Your uncle! We are nothing like you!”

“No?” a dark chuckle rumbled from the void. “You killed the traitor’s best friend on Tuanul, your poor choices led to the death of his fiancée’s sister, your mutiny led to the obliteration of the majority of the Resistance. Are we that different?” Poe’s finger twitched on the weapon, but he remained silent. Rey watched Finn turn to the general, his expression conflicted, but his blaster remained aimed in the direction of their enemy. She knew Kylo had been watching as well. “You may wear her wedding ring around your neck, Dameron, but we all know you're the real reason behind your mother's death. You left Shara without saying goodbye. You broke her heart. When you hate me for what I did to my mother, you hate yourself.”

Finn grabbed Poe's arm to prevent him from reacting to the inciting words, then made his own demand. “Put the weapon down and kick it to us. No one needs to get hurt.” He exchanged a warning glance with Poe as they waited, the air in the room heavy with tense anticipation.

Kylo hummed but ignored the demand. Instead, he stepped forward into the low light, the shadows playing ominously on his hardened features. He looked positively murderous. “You shot first. This is not a negotiation.”

“You're right,” Poe scoffed. “You have nothing that I want to negotiate with. But I...” he paused, gesturing to Rey's body, “...have something *you* want, don't I?” He grasped Rey's chin to judge Kylo's reaction, but his face was a careful mask of impassivity. Poe grabbed a black cloth from one of the chairs, and Rey’s heart stuttered when she saw the silky, red material reflect in the low lights. The last time she had seen it was when Leia disappeared. He threw the cloak at Kylo, who caught it instinctively without removing his eyes from the general. “Is that yours?” he challenged. “Spies for the First Order sure are getting pretty, aren't they, Kylo?” His face remained settled into the hungry, calculating expression he always wore, but her face twisted in fury.
After everything I sacrificed for them, he accuses me of being a spy?

“How dare you...” she started to protest, but Poe turned her chin toward him and tilted his head down slightly to whisper in her ear.

“Are you loyal to the Resistance, Rey? Prove it. Prove me wrong, prove you're not a traitor, prove there is nothing between you and him.” His breath huffed feverishly against her cheek. “Kiss me like you did when you were protecting him. And then look your enemy in the eye and tell him who has your loyalty.”

Underneath his saccharine words was a thinly veiled threat – she had to prove her loyalty to the Resistance or face execution. There was no arguing her way out of this. They had been caught committing treason. Kylo had warned her of the consequences, but she hadn't wanted to believe her own friends would turn against her. She realized now how it looked, however. She had been caught embracing the enemy. As far as they knew, she could have been providing him critical information on the Resistance. She should have been surprised they waited until morning. Her only guess for that was Finn had been conflicted, he hadn’t run to the general immediately. If she had chased after him, perhaps she could have prevented all of this. Now it was too late; Poe suspected her being a spy.

It had been quite the opposite, Kylo had risked his own life to help protect them – to what end she still didn't understand – and never asked for her to betray them in return. But she was still guilty of treachery, she knew that. There had been no mission to turn him; she had maintained a connection to the enemy despite the risk it posed to the Resistance. If she had allowed him to shut her out, neither he nor her friends would be in danger right now.

Is this war? she thought jadedly.

If they had been caught by the First Order, Kylo would already be on the floor in a pool of his own blood. She knew what she had to do, yet part of her felt as if she was back on Jakku, standing before Plutt as he denied her the appropriate portions she had earned. Rey had stayed strong then – she was a survivor – and she could be strong now, for them both. This was her chance to prove her loyalty, even if it was only long enough to save Kylo from their ambush and save them from his wrath. She knew in that moment that she couldn't join the First Order, but neither could she stay with the Resistance.

Not after this.
“Who are you loyal to?” Poe asked, loud enough for them all to hear.

She quickly caught Kylo’s stare, concern piercing through the fury. He had no idea what decision she had just made to protect him. Not that her reasoning would matter to him. Her mind flashed to the betrayal in his eyes after she had kissed Poe at the top of the temple that night. This would hurt him. He would hate her. And she feared what he would do to her friends in retaliation. But perhaps it was good fortune in disguise; perhaps it was the only way to convince Kylo to leave this trap. Even if he never forgave her, it was worth his life. With fearless determination, her eyes fluttered to meet Poe’s. He lowered his weapon slightly as she leaned into him.

She pressed her lips to Poe’s in a chaste kiss. Refusing to look either man in the eye, she pulled away. With a smile that was as convincing as she could muster with a blaster to her throat, she said, “I am loyal to the Resistance.”

As soon as she spoke those words, she jolted as if her chest had been ripped apart by a blaster. In a panic, she stared down at herself. Nothing. It was a phantom injury.

It was... him.

Her eyes snapped to her bondmate, fearing the worst. His chest was surging heavily, but there was no physical sign of a wound. No one had moved from their positions, a single blaster bolt hadn’t brightened the room, but the residual ache from the phantom injury still lingered. She was certain she felt his pain. His barriers on his side of the bond were tightly sealed, but she wondered if it was possible to wound him so deeply that it could cause physical pain. That wasn't possible. Was it? She feared the hatred she would find when she finally braved his familiar stare, but she needed to know what she had done to him.

Her throat constricted as she dragged her eyes up to meet his. The truth was far worse than she had imagined. She would have preferred the hatred. Rey swallowed a sob at the sight of the raw agony darkening in his broken eyes. She held his stare, yearning for him to find the truth in hers, but his stare dropped to the floor as if it pained him to even look at her.

*I'm sorry,* she tried, though she knew it wouldn’t reach him in their closed-off bond. It was trite and devastatingly inadequate, but there was nothing else to say. Poe, the kiss, her declaration of loyalty – they had meant nothing to her in comparison to her bond with him. But it had meant the galaxy to him. He had looked at her as if death would have been a kinder fate. She wished she could convey how strongly she had desired for the lips she kissed to belong to him. But now it was too late.

Rey felt a spike in the Force and startled at the sound of two loud thuds to her left. She craned her
neck away from the weapon pressed into her skin to discover the two guards crumpled on the floor, weapons abandoned at their sides, unconscious. Finn had nearly dropped his blaster at the display between Poe and Rey, but the collapse of the guards renewed his attention toward their enemy. He raised his blaster toward Kylo as Poe shifted his weapon back toward her temple.

Kylo reignited his lightsaber and stepped forward, the two sides separated only by the flimsy table of the war room. It was a false security; the Force could remove the single obstacle between them with ease. Rey knew her friends were kidding themselves if they didn't believe the only reason there was still a table between them was because Kylo wanted it there. She flinched when she looked back at her bondmate. Blood lust burned in his dark eyes.

“Ben, please, don't do this!” she begged. “Just go.”

“No! He...” Kylo paused as an invisible force seemed to crash through his body. He hunched over as if he was going to be sick, his eyes shut tight, sucking in uneven breaths as if oxygen would ease his suffering. A low whimper escaped his throat, his face twisted into a grimace as his entire jaw quivered. In front of his enemies, no matter what was tormenting him internally, Kylo was usually the embodiment of intimidation and strength. For the man to be nearly brought to his knees, he must be wounded far greater than she imagined. She remembered how weak he had become in their battle on Starkiller. She feared what would happen if he fell apart surrounded by the Resistance.

Kylo overcame his misery enough to straighten, standing quietly with his head slumped forward, dark hair obscuring his eyes, his shoulders tense and trembling. There was a heavy draw on the Force – on the darkness around them – and Kylo straightened to his full height. With a stuttered breath, he forced his pained eyes open. Raising his weapon with an unsteady hand, he stared at Poe, but he was speaking to her. “He nearly killed you the last time. He won't have that chance again.”

“I won't hurt her,” Poe said, his voice as cold and apathetic as she had ever heard it. “If you drop your weapon, turn around, get on your knees, and put your hands on your head.”

Finn had finally had enough. “We're not the Hutts, General; she's not a bargaining credit.”

“Or...” Kylo interjected as he stepped closer, stony and imposing. The darkness had found him in his pain, soothing him into feigned control. Unfettered rage sparked in his eyes, his attention focused entirely on Poe. “I could rip your mind apart until you can't remember your own name. You were lucky the last time. I promise you, it gets much worse.”
“Lucky?” Poe stammered, forcing Rey down onto her knees in rage. He pressed the blaster to her forehead. “I have nightmares every night, flashbacks during the day! My memory is jumbled. Sometimes I still feel you in there! I'll never forget what you did, and I will take from you what you took from me. I don't need the Force to make you suffer. And I promise, after I am satisfied you've lost everything important to you, I'll kill you.”

Kylo rolled the hilt of his lightsaber in a lazy flourish, clenching his jaw. To the outsider, he might have looked bored or even smug, but she knew Kylo well enough to see the guilt written across his features. He sold his haughty indifference with the tone she recognized from their first interactions. “Trust me, the nightmares won't end with my death. Or my suffering. I wonder, though,” he narrowed his eyes as he cocked his head in that derisive Kylo way, “Does the Resistance know their leader has dark side thoughts of revenge? Do they know what I've seen in your mind? Leia made a mistake making you general, Dameron. Hell, even FN-2187 is more rational, and he's a known traitor! But if you're suffering, I'd be more than happy to put you out of your misery. And mine.” Rey sighed internally at his inciting words.

_Ben, what are you doing? Do you have a death wish?_

“You want misery Ben Solo? I'll give you misery!” Poe snapped as he stared down at Rey. The use of her bondmate's given name seemed heavy with familiarity on Poe's tongue. She wondered then if there was more history between them before the torture. She knew Poe's family had known Luke and Leia. Was it too far of a stretch to believe he had met Ben Solo? Did he loathe Kylo Ren so intensely because he knew the boy he was before? Not that it mattered; there would be no talking the general down from his quest to kill their enemy, even if he had once known the young Ben Solo. And the kiss only served to send Kylo into a dangerous spiral that threatened to drag them all down with him – no prisoners, no mercy. Her heart was being wrenched in two separate directions, and neither side would meet her in the middle.

“That's enough! Both of you!” she demanded helplessly.

_Ben, go! Please!_

“Poe, you can't hurt her. Point your blaster at our true enemy.” Finn was terrified, she could hear it quiver in his voice, but he spoke in a soothing tone that straddled the line of insubordination. Was he beginning to distrust their general as well? Did he regret what he had done?

“We can end this war right now.” Poe's eyes never left hers as he spoke, not to address Finn or threaten Kylo. But the ambiguity of his words was the most disconcerting. Did Poe think killing her would make Kylo suffer? Would Poe hurt her as revenge against Kylo? Or was this all one disturbing bluff to test the depths of Kylo's loyalty to her? It had to be.
Ben, it's a trap! He wants you to surrender! They'll kill you!

Kylo did not disappoint. He could have feigned apathy; it was an expression he wore well. He could have called Poe's bluff – it was a bluff, wasn't it? Ignoring her pleas, he gave Poe the leverage he was desperately searching for. “If you hurt her, you're right; the war ends now. Because I'll burn this entire place to the ground with every single last one of you inside it.” Poe grinned knowingly, and Kylo continued. “She's done nothing to you. She's nothing... to me. But she's your last hope. You kill her, and there will be no one powerful enough to stop me. And if you believe killing her or me will end this war, you're either naïve or thoroughly delusional.”

“I'm willing to find out,” Poe sneered. His finger twitched on the trigger, but the warning in the Force never came. Rey watched in silence as he held the blaster to her head, his determination waning with every passing second. Poe was many things, but he was not a cold-blooded murderer.

Rey did not fear him; her mind was still tormentingly replaying Kylo's words, as if they would change if she repeated them enough. He had told Poe that she was nothing to him. When he had glanced over at her after he'd said it, his eyes were wide, and he struggled to swallow. He had known what saying those words would do to her. *You're nothing,* echoed in her mind. *But not to me.* She had always been nothing, but now she was nothing to him, too. She was right. After what she had done to protect them, he hated her. Finn studied her carefully as she bit her lips to overpower her tears. None of them deserved to see her cry.

Finn had not come to the same conclusion she had, or he had misinterpreted why her eyes were brimming with tears. Finn may have had an allegiance to the Resistance, but his loyalty was to the people he loved over the organization he fought for. He raised his own blaster, aiming it at the general's head. “You will not hurt her,” he said with such authority that Rey knew he would make a strong leader in his own right. Poe turned to stare at Finn in bewilderment. Reading the resolve in his colonel’s eyes, Poe cautiously lowered his weapon, and Rey stole the first opportunity to jump to her feet.

“He is our enemy!” Poe shouted, gesturing to Kylo.

“Then act like it!” Finn fired back, his weapon still trained on his own general.

Rey wanted to point out that their "enemy" could have killed them both while they were bickering. If it had been a few weeks ago she would have said it. But she had learned that her mouth could make a critical situation worse – she happened to share that quality with her bondmate – and this seemed to be one of those times.
Kylo's emotions were spiraling out into the Force. His suffering was imbued into the energy around them, the strength of his pain debilitating even across the room. He was wound so tightly that, given his capricious nature, a violent outburst was likely imminent. Scrutinizing the other two men intently, his burning eyes held their focus, but he made no move to harm them. He had every opportunity, but he somehow found restraint in his struggle. This was not the man she first met in the forest. She smiled at him appreciatively, but he continued to avoid her. Kylo suddenly bristled, taking a half step forward, and her attention was drawn back to her friends.

The confrontation between her friends had escalated to deadly within seconds. Rey always assumed consequential moments would occur in slow motion – when she had fallen off the wreckage of a destroyer, or fought in a lightsaber battle, every second passing like a lifetime. But this happened so fast that she hadn't time to scream before it was over. She was left frozen in shock, her mind reeling in an attempt to understand how it had deteriorated so quickly.

Temporarily distracted by movement from Kylo, Finn turned his attention away from the blaster he had firmly pointed in Poe's direction. In his anger and betrayal, Poe had lunged for the weapon. Finn held steadfast to the blaster, however, struggling with Poe to regain control. Both men were shouting, neither would back down. The Force was instantly alight in warning of danger. Before Rey could form a coherent sentence, Finn's finger slipped on the trigger.

The shot was deafening – the sound of it jolted Rey where she stood. Both men stood frozen in fear and shock, eyes fixed on a blue blaster bolt hovering in stasis centimeters from Poe's chest. There was no doubt from anyone in the room that it would have been fatal had its progress not been interrupted. Poe eyed his colonel in disbelief before turning toward her. Finn followed suit. As they stared at her in awe, she realized they thought she had stopped it. She hadn't. But if she hadn't saved Poe from certain death, that meant...

“Ben?” Rey whipped around in search of her bondmate. He stared back at her with a guarded expression, chewing on his words. With his gloved hand outstretched, he swiftly manipulated the trajectory of the beam of plasma, allowing it to fly unhindered into the wall behind them.

“You saved him,” she whispered in awe.

_Why? You had every reason to want him dead._

It was as if she was seeing the man in front of her – wholly – for the first time. She saw him for who he truly was, something she had been too blind to see before. He was not the boy he had once been, nor the monster he pretended to be, nor the man she hoped he could be. She saw his darkness for what it was – it was permeating the Force around them – but she also saw his light. It was a
light that Snoke could not snuff out, nor Kylo suppress, nor Rey provide. She knew in that moment, even if Kylo never walked a path she could follow, even if he hated her, there was inherent good in him. Good beyond whatever compassion he held for her.

This was Ben Solo. He didn't need to change into the man he could have been before Snoke, or become an unrealistic version of himself, free of darkness, to be saved. He could carry the scars of his past and struggle with darkness and still save himself. It didn’t matter what he believed; she saw the truth in him. That gave her the most genuine hope she’d had for him yet. He could make the right choice, not because of her or their bond, but because somewhere inside he knew it was the right thing to do.

A warmth blossomed in her chest, overwhelming and all-encompassing. In a moment of curiosity, she didn’t fight against its strength. She allowed her feelings for him to swell free of their bonds inside her heart for the first time, surrendering the control that was so deeply ingrained it had become second-nature. The purity and intensity of the truth in her soul stole the very breath from her lips.

Despite their desperate situation, she couldn’t help but smile. There was no denying her feelings for him, and though part of her was terrified, it felt right. She wanted nothing more than to run to him, throw her arms around his strong shoulders, and show him what he meant to her. She couldn’t yet, not before he was ready to turn, but she had inextinguishable hope that one day he would. He tilted his head slightly as he noticed a change in her. Did he see it in her eyes, what she understood now? It was almost as if they were the only two left in the room.

Almost.

All at once, his eyes flared, and his lightsaber rotated up to block his face. The bright blue spark of another blaster bolt ricocheted off the blade. His chest heaved as his anger returned in an instant. She spun back to her friends, knowing what she would find, yet her stomach sinking all the same. Poe stood with his blaster still aimed at Kylo's head.

“How could you! He spared your life!” she shouted in disbelief. Poe's eyes flashed to hers, but just as quickly refocused on the Supreme Leader.

“How disappointing, Dameron. Did you not learn the last time?” Kylo said behind her, his words seared with deadly intent. “Your blasters are ineffective against me. This, on the other hand...” he paused, twisting his lightsaber in a series of practiced swings and slashes, “This is very effective.” He swung the blade down upon the table with velocity only he could muster. Not that he needed it. The table easily split in two from the intense heat of the plasma.
“Ben...” she warned. He had controlled his anger better than she had expected, considering the circumstances, but she could see the restraints fraying by the second. She knew Kylo well enough to know he had been pushed too far, and she feared what would happen once he snapped.

“Sure, your poorly constructed lightsaber is effective...” Poe said in his antagonistic tone that she knew was intended to push Kylo to react, “…especially if you're a coward and kill your own father while he's defenseless.” Poe got the reaction he was hoping for. Kylo moved toward the general, lightsaber raised in threat.

Beebee-Ate, who had watched the confrontation in silence thus far, came screeching between Kylo and his master. Poe flinched at the sudden change in dynamics, and Kylo read it for what it was: fear. Perhaps he had known it before, or perhaps he had seen it in Poe’s eyes, but he understood the droid meant something to him. He stepped toward the droid and lifted his lightsaber. With power beyond his own strength, he brought the blade down upon the astromech. And with power beyond his own strength, he stalled the momentum of the blade before it struck.

In his rage, he had nearly missed Blue rolling in front of the other droid. “Move, Blue!” He was seething with rage, his energy a storm of emotion. The droid couldn’t have known what it would have done to Kylo if he struck him, what it would have reminded him of. The black and silver astromech whimpered in fear as he beeped a response back at him. Why? It had asked him. Why would he hurt the other droid? Blue said he wasn’t “bad like the others,” and, while Rey didn’t understand what it meant, Kylo apparently did. The rage visibly faded from his eyes. He lowered the blade and backed away from the two droids.

Rey sensed Poe take advantage of the distraction to re-aim his weapon toward the Supreme Leader. Before she could warn her bondmate, his head snapped to Poe’s direction. He had sensed the threat as well. Roaring in a feral rage, his free hand shot out, his fingers curled in as though he was squeezing...

“Poe!” Finn cried out from behind her as their general dropped to his knees. Rey turned to see Poe, his face red and eyes wide in fear, grasping at his throat as he made frantic gurgling sounds.

“Ben, stop!” she begged, once again caught in the middle between them. “Let him go!”

“Why, Rey? He threatened to kill you!” His tone was cutting and cruel. His eyes flashed in betrayal, as if he couldn't possibly understand how she could defend Poe. “What is your excuse this time? Hmm? Do you love him, too?”

“No, I love you!”
She inhaled sharply as the realization of her admission struck her.

What have I done?

She hadn’t meant to say it aloud, for all of them to hear, but it wasn’t a lie. She loved him. She didn’t love the Supreme Leader, the Knight, Kylo Ren; no, those were all disguises he wore to hide the man she loved – Ben Solo. When did this happen? How did this happen? She felt…something in that hut, in the elevator, when he saved her life, and when they fought together; but then he broke her heart, and she was sure that whatever it was she had felt had been wrong.

She hadn’t wanted to love him; she had wanted to hate him. It would have been infinitely easier to hate him; but no matter how angry she was at him, it was still there. The moment she was around him again, she could feel that pull to him, like nothing else in the galaxy mattered. Then she had seen him for who he was, and she didn’t fear her feelings for him anymore.

Her mistake was saying it aloud. What she had learned in her life was that if she loved something, she had to keep it close to her heart, or others would only ever steal it or destroy it. It was easier not to love anything. She knew this could only end poorly. They would convince she was crazy or stupid. They would tell her she was wrong.

Was it wrong, though? Was loving someone broken and lost and drastically misunderstood wrong? Was it wrong to believe that people could change? Or, at least, be the person they truly were inside? To her, he was so much more than the crimes he had committed. He was so much more than what that monster had created him to be. It didn’t matter to her if no one else could see what she knew to be true. She would never have known it herself – or cared – if their souls were not connected. Her bond let her see what no one else could; there was light in Ben Solo.

And now she loved him. She loved the broken man who had once been a broken boy, whose first memory was his own attempted murder. She loved a man who suffered a childhood of loneliness, abandonment, gaslighting, manipulation, self-loathing, and lies. She loved the man who fell to darkness when he awoke to his uncle’s lethal blade. She loved the man who suffered torture, brainwashing, and deception at the hands of a monster. She loved a man who raided peaceful worlds, mass-murdered innocent civilians, killed his fellow Jedi, took the life of his own father, nearly killed her best friend, killed many members of the Resistance and chose the darkness over her. She loved the man who told her she wasn’t alone, killed his own master for her, committed treason for her, saved her life, saved her friends’ lives, was bonded to her since before she was born, stared at her as if she were the only woman in the universe, and was the matching complement to her soul. He was her equal and helped her feel belonging in ways she never had before. She loved the darkness in him with the light. She loved him.
It was greater than love, this emotion that had developed sometime over the past few weeks; it was greater than the both of them. It felt as if this connection to him had always been there, as if it was always meant to happen, as if their souls were destined to be drawn to each other. It seemed impossible, of course, that he would ever learn to love her. Her own parents couldn’t even love her, but anything would have seemed impossible to the girl curled up in an abandoned AT-AT just a few weeks ago. She had to believe he wouldn’t abandon her like her family had, and, in return, she wouldn’t give up on him like his once had. Was it possible they could never be lonely again? Her heart leapt at the thought.

The room was silent save for the pounding of her heart, the crackling hum of Kylo’s lightsaber, and Poe's loud gasps as he sucked in oxygen. The apple of Kylo's throat bobbed in apprehension. He was staring at her with unwavering fixation, his eyes piercing straight through to her soul. She laid the truth bare for him, knowing – for the first time in her entire life – she had willingly trusted someone with her heart, and she had given it to the man with the greatest capacity to break it. Kylo was not the “safe” choice or the "easy" choice or the choice ensuring "happiness" in the end, but he was worth it. To her, it didn’t matter what he deserved; she had learned before she ever truly knew him that it was not her role to judge his fate – it was the will of the Force. All that mattered to her was what she believed; she believed in compassion, mercy, and understanding, she believed in hope and the light she felt in his soul, she believed in him. Then again, wasn’t that what stories said love was anyway?

His eyes were wide, brows raised. He was dumbfounded into silence. It was the same expression he wore in the interrogation room when she had forced her way into his mind. He sucked in a shuddered breath. Shock, fear, and disbelief played across his features, but then, on his slow exhale, it morphed slightly. His eyes flared, and his parted lips spoke of recognition and awe. He looked as he had on Starkiller when she summoned the lightsaber. "It is you," he had said. He seemed to be thinking the same thought as he stood before her. His eyes were bright; she could almost feel his fragile hope and light, even through the barriers in place in the bond.

Then he pulled away from their connection as his eyes scanned the room. His default emotion – anger – burst through, shadowing his hope in darkness. His jaw shifted, his eyes darkened and narrowed, his brow furrowed. She sensed new emotions take hold.

Distrust.

Pain.

Betrayal.

“Liar!” His voice thundered off the walls of the temple room. Biting his lip, his breathing ragged, he lifted his lightsaber and pointed it toward her with a trembling hand. She shook her head as her
sight blurred with tears.

“No, Ben...”

“It’s okay, Rey.” Poe rasped, his voice raw and strained from the damage done by Kylo. “Our ruse didn’t work. You tried your best, but he obviously doesn’t believe you could ever love an evil monster like him. We should have pretended to surrender instead. But it’ll be all right; we’ll find another way to kill him.”

Rey flinched as if she had been slapped. She spun to face her friends in horror. Finn’s eyes were wide with disbelief and Poe’s were dark and cruel. He knew what he had done. The man, for all his rash decisions and propensity to blow things up, had become general for a reason. He was more than an excellent pilot. He was smart, perceptive, he understood the strategy of war, and he knew words could be weapons just as dangerous as the strongest cannons.

She turned back to Kylo, but it was too late; his face was cold and closed off. The damage had been done. She had two choices – tell Kylo the truth and risk facing charges of treason or say nothing and let him believe she played a part in their scheme to assassinate him. She risked losing her freedom or losing him forever.

“No, Ben, he's lying. You have to believe me. I love –”

“Stop it, Rey. Just...stop. I know you don't,” Kylo interrupted, his tone callous. “If you did, you would be a fool, and you’re no fool.” He lowered his eyes, refusing to look at her as if he was disgusted by her presence.

Sorrow bled into her words as he tore her heart to shreds. “How could you say that?”

Poe’s gruff voice spoke up behind her. “Because it’s true, Rey. You would be a fool. But he knows all about that from experience, don’t you, Ben? I see the way you look at her. I see how that kiss destroyed you. But not as much as hearing her lie about her love for you, right, Supreme Leader?” All at once, Poe’s aggressive demeanor changed. He clapped Finn on the shoulder as he laughed deliriously. “This... this is too good. Has the Jedi Killer fallen in love with the Last Jedi? Is that why you're here? You thought she would love someone like you?” He paused, and when he spoke again, the laughter was gone from his voice. “I promise, I'll let you die her hero if you surrender now.”
Kylo stood quietly for a moment, his eyes still downcast, his expression guarded. His only movement was the working of his jaw. The room was silent as they waited for a response – any response – to the accusation. With all the responses she expected or possibly hoped for, she hadn't envisioned what came next, but Kylo was nothing if not breathtakingly unpredictable.

“Okay,” he smirked sarcastically, meeting their stare to reveal a wicked glint in his eye. He disengaged his lightsaber and clipped it on his belt. Raising his impossibly large hands, open palms in front of him, he lifted a brow in instigation. “I surrender. Come get me.” He had never looked more like a Solo to Rey than in that moment.

Neither Poe nor Finn made an immediate move. They made brief eye contact before Finn raised his blaster. “The lightsaber.”

“Want it?” Kylo unclipped it from his belt and extended it in an outstretched palm. “Come get it.”

“No, he saw what you did the last time you offered someone your lightsaber in surrender.” Poe continued to needle Kylo – to what end, Rey wasn't sure. If Kylo did react, it wouldn't bode well for him.

Kylo ignored the general, his dark eyes fixed on his former trooper. “I can defeat you without the lightsaber, Eight-Seven. You know that. Don't be foolish.”

“Drop. The. Weapon.” Finn, to his credit, showed no fear, though Rey knew what it did to him to be in the presence of the man he had known as the enforcer of the First Order. She couldn't fault him for it. She had no idea the atrocities he had witnessed her bondmate commit. She had no idea the history between them other than when Kylo nearly took his life. Rey remained quiet, watching the battle of wits unfold before her, willing the man she loved to disappear. Love. She loved their enemy, complicating her role in the war, endangering everyone.

Kylo considered Finn's command for a moment. “Okay.” The environment around them changed, transporting Rey and Kylo to his quarters. Rey watched her friends for a sign that they noticed the change, but their eyes never left Kylo. Rey suppressed a grin as she watched Kylo flip his wrist, holding the weapon over the floor in full view of the two other men. She knew what he planned to do. “I'll drop it.”

He released the weapon, then manipulated the surroundings until it faded back to the war room. The lightsaber dropped and disappeared somewhere on his side of the connection. He dipped his head down slightly to catch their eyes, studying them for a reaction. He looked positively predatory.
He's… playing with them.

If Kylo felt any fear in the situation, he wasn't revealing it. No, this was a game, each move calculated, like Dejarik. Perhaps she had once again mistaken his calculated decisions for impulsivity. She turned to look at the other men. Finn's eyes were wide as he scanned the floor for the lightsaber. “What did you do? Where did it go?”

“You said 'drop it.' You didn't specify where.” Kylo smirked again, but this was not his father's smirk. It was much darker. She wondered if he looked more like his grandfather in that moment instead. Even though she associated him with darkness, it didn't remind her of Kylo Ren. He didn't smile. This reminded her of a young Ben Solo, who had not been all light as she had first imagined. This was the smirk of a young boy who was lonely on his birthday, so he set his parent's house on fire and watched it burn.

His eyes were alight with some undefinable emotion between mirth and blood lust. It seemed as if he found some sort of pleasure in tooling with them. He was a walking contradiction that left Rey more confused than ever. Despite the barriers, she could feel the staggering weight of his emotions burdening him in the Force. Outwardly, he displayed little sign of it. She was certain, to her friends, his act was convincing. She wondered if he had perfected that mask long before his recruitment with the First Order. But Rey knew him, he was too expressive of a man to successfully pretend he was unaffected by it all as pain ripped him apart inside. Her friends didn’t notice his pain – or, more likely, didn’t care – and his cavalier attitude had worn their patience thin.

“That's it!” Poe snapped. “Get on the ground.”

To the surprise of no one, he did not comply. Instead, Kylo slowly pulled off a glove and lowered the barriers in the bond. His agony hit her like a duracreept wall, suffocating her in emotion. His overwhelming pain temporarily blinded her in darkness. If she hadn't witnessed the cause, she would have thought he was gravely injured. Perhaps he was, but the wound wasn't physical. I'm sorry. She yearned for him to look at her, for him to understand, but he was entirely focused on her friends. Never breaking eye contact with the general, he bent over and picked up a dagger-sized splinter from the debris of the table.

Ben, what are you doing?

With the splinter grasped tightly in his gloved hand, he studied his bare palm with apparent rapt fascination. When he raised his eyes, there was something wild that betrayed his calm exterior. Without a word, he stabbed the splinter into the center of his palm. Rey yelped in surprise as a similar pain radiated from her hand. As he withdrew the splinter from his hand without a twitch of
a grimace, she clutched at the phantom pain in her hand.

Finn gasped in understanding.

“Before you kill me,” Kylo said, switching his attention to Finn. “You might want to know a little detail about our bond. She can feel my pain, and I hers. Have you considered what happens if you kill me?”

Rey watched her friend's eyes widen in horror. If Poe was surprised, he didn't show it, but Poe excelled at strategy and card games in his own right. Leia had once mentioned that he would have given Han a run for his credits in Sabaac. Kylo may have been playing games, but Poe was there to match him move for move. She turned back to her bondmate, fearing what his next move would be. That was her mistake.

“As I said before,” Poe said resolutely as he fiddled with his blaster before pressing it into the back of her head. “I'm willing to find out.” She didn't register the sound of the blast before her vision faded to darkness.
Chapter End Notes

Manipulated/forced kiss between a male character toward a female character

Threat of violence with a lightsaber

Threat of death with a blaster

Account of past violence

Jealousy
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Kylo cried out into the room one last time before collapsing to his knees in exhaustion. His voice was hoarse, his breaths came heavy as he doubled over, disengaging his lightsaber. Enough had been destroyed by his rage. The bed was in an impressive number of pieces on the floor, the edges of each piece of blanket glowed orange, some pieces still fluttering down through the recycled air. He hated the air here. He hated this ship. He hated this room. He hated the bed they had lain in together. He hated himself for being so foolish. He hated all of it.

At least he could still feel her in the bond. She wasn't dead, as he had believed for the split-second he watched her body crumple to the floor before they were ripped apart to opposite sides of the galaxy. He had watched her eyes flutter closed, her knees give out under her weight, and he thought
he was witnessing the moment his own life ended. Not because he would die, no, he wasn't lucky enough for that.

In that moment, he understood – losing her would be like tearing out his soul; he would be an empty husk of a man, even more than he was after Luke betrayed him. He would have found them, killed them all, burned the entire galaxy to the ground. She was alive, and, for the moment, that was all that mattered. There was something strangely comforting and familiar to know that she was a breath away across the bond, and he was terrified of what would happen if that was taken away like everything good in his life.

Trying to exist without her after holding her in his arms—he knew it would never be enough. He had lived his entire life lonely in a crowded room, alone to face the creatures of the darkness. Kylo had never needed anyone—though he hadn't always understood that—and it had been years since he wanted to let anyone into his cold, dark, vapid world. There had been no point—not when he refused to trust anyone, focused solely on achieving his destiny and destroying his past. Once his family was gone and he held the power of the galaxy in his hand, it had all become meaningless. His life revolved around monotony, counting the days until the Force took mercy on him and ended his miserable life.

The only light in his dark, empty world was her. It was only ever her. He had foolishly allowed her in and had never wanted anything – not power or revenge or destiny – more than he wanted to just be in her presence, allowing her light to warm his worthless, defective heart. She had ruined him, but he didn't hate it. He refused to admit how much he didn't hate it.

He hadn't wanted this fiery tempest of light to burrow her way into his life and disrupt everything, distracting him from the goals he'd sacrificed for and committed to for the better part of a decade. But he had allowed her in, foolishly revealed the most vulnerable side of himself to her, and shown her the monster he truly was. She had become a permanent fixture without him realizing it, and now the thought of a life without her felt empty and meaningless.

He didn't know what he wanted anymore, only that it all centered around her. He wondered if he confessed those thoughts that plagued him, if it would terrify her more than all the evil he had done. Yes, he decided, it would. He couldn't bear to see the look in her eyes—the one from the forest when she called him a monster—after he revealed such weaknesses for her. If there was one truth he knew, it was that he would never deserve someone as good as her. He knew all of this, yet he had never thought she would betray him again after what had happened between them.

But she did.

She betrayed him spectacularly. What she had done, what she had said, it had gutted him. He closed his eyes, reliving it all in torturous detail. Only that pain would provide him strength in the
Kylo had awoken in a panic. He suspected a nightmare, but for once the images didn't haunt him when he woke. As sleep faded from his mind, he remembered the strange dream with Rey, where they had lain together by his favorite lake. Not only that, but she had fallen asleep in his arms. He reached instinctively toward the other side of the bed, the sheets cold under his explorations. Rey was no longer curled up against him. His bed was empty – suddenly too large, uncomfortable, and foreign – and he couldn't help the disappointment that sank heavily in his stomach. He knew the bond had not brought her to him permanently, that the contentment he had felt would fade away with her, but he hadn't considered how hollow and lost he would feel without her.

Kylo groaned as he rolled over, the aches and stiffness from years of injuries and training reminding him that his years under his former master’s guidance had not been kind on his body. Not that life had ever taken a particular interest in showing him kindness. Despite his physical deficiencies and the Rey-shaped void spreading irritatingly in his chest, something felt... off... with how he had awoken. It had been gradual, not plagued by fear. His mind was clearer, his emotions calmer, his connection to the Force effortless. It was such a rare sensation; it took a moment for him to realize what it was that he felt—rested.

When had he fallen asleep? He glanced at the chronometer on the desk. He had been asleep for nearly four hours. He hadn’t slept that long since the night at the temple. The relief was extensive, softening his most jagged edges, assuaging a profound inadequacy he hadn't appreciated he had.

As sleep faded from his senses, agitation set in. The fleeting calm faded as anything good in his life was wont to do. A sweep in the Force explained why. Dread pricked the hairs on the back of his neck as he felt a presence close by. Too close. Scanning the room quickly, he called his lightsaber. He stood silently in the darkness, listening, and waiting. His eyes darted around the room, but he sensed no movement. He felt out into the Force again. There was no one else in the chamber with him.

He wondered why he had sensed a presence. Why he had felt such...panic.

The realization shivered down his spine. That emotion was not his own.

“Rey.”

He sought out her presence in his mind, willing his thoughts into her consciousness.
“Are you okay?”

She did not answer him, but he sensed her push back against his energy. If she was forcing him out, then clearly she was okay. “Fine.” He deactivated his lightsaber and threw it on his bed in frustration. He sat down on the edge and waited anxiously for the fear across the bond to subside. But it only intensified. A sudden jolt of pain arced through his abdomen. He doubled over as his senses numbed. That wasn’t his pain.

“Rey?”

She didn’t answer. He fettered the panic rising in his chest as he deliberated a plan.

She was halfway across the galaxy. If something had happened to her...he knew he was powerless to stop it. At first, he feared the involvement of Hux. Did the general find her in an attempt to compromise him? No, he realized. Hux would have demanded to be on-world. He wouldn’t have missed the opportunity for self-glorification in front of his troops. He knew it wasn’t the First Order. The traitor... It couldn’t have been a coincidence; the traitor’s appearance and then fear she faced the following morning. They had turned on her as he feared.

Should he have expected anything less from the scum of the galaxy? It was all his fault. He shouldn’t have trusted her faith in the traitor, he should have done more to warn her. He could have come for her, rather than holding onto her all night like a naïve fool. Would Dameron go as far as executing her?

Not if Kylo got to her first; he would not allow her to pay for his own mistakes. He decided to bring her to the First Order, so he could keep her safe. If she refused or was already taken captive, then he would offer himself in her place. He would die before he let them hurt her. He sensed a rise in her fear... and betrayal. He knew he was running out of time.

“Hold on, Rey, I’m coming for you.”

He had hastily grabbed a tunic, throwing it over his head as he searched her consciousness again.

“Rey!”

As he pulled a boot onto his foot, he pushed again and she let him in. He overheard a conversation
“As far as I know, he's on the Finalizer,” he heard her calmly answer. She was talking; she didn't sound like her life was in immediate peril. He listened to the other voice, a man, asking her about why Kylo had been in her room. He recognized the voice – it was Poe Dameron, he was certain of it. He knew he shouldn't be listening, if Rey knew... she would never trust him again. But the new general had almost killed her once, and he had good reason to do it again. There was no alternative he considered to staying as long as the Force allowed. He would rather risk overhearing sensitive Resistance strategies that he would force himself not to use against them rather than risk terminating their connection. He would stay until he knew she was okay. At least, that was why he convinced himself he stayed. She had closed herself off to him as thoroughly as she could across the bond; he could feel her trying to keep him out. It seemed she had something to hide as well.

He couldn’t have imagined, however, just what she was hiding from him. Rey was calmly explaining their bond away, revealing to her general that she had only followed Kylo to the Supremacy to turn him, but he didn't care what she said as long as Poe believed her. At least, he didn’t care until she mentioned his mother.

“My communication with him was Leia’s idea. She was made aware of the bond when I was on Ahch-To. She believed Kylo Ren could be turned and tasked me with a mission to form a rapport with him and push for his defection. He has emotional weaknesses that Snoke did not possess and has revealed a disillusionment with the First Order. The greatest obstacle I have faced in my mission is that he believes his second-in-command, the one responsible for Hosnian Prime, would take drastic measures if he defected. But I believe now he can be turned. We have an undeniable opportunity to dismantle the First Order from the inside if I can turn him. I just need more time.” He dropped the other boot in his hand and sat on the edge of his bed, his eyes losing focus.

It was all a lie.

In a rare act of self-preservation, he almost shut himself out of their connection entirely. But he tortured himself further and stayed. Perhaps it was part morbid curiosity, and perhaps it was part masochism. Primarily, it was his foolish sense of loyalty. Even if he was only a mission to her, he couldn’t leave Rey to handle the wrath of Poe Dameron alone. He expected anger, hatred, sorrow... something in reaction to her admission. But he just felt... hollow. Relieved, almost. It was a feeling he had grown quite familiar with; the disappointed acceptance that the people he feared trusting had proven him right. No one had ever wanted him, just his power. To believe Rey could ever want anything else from him was delusional. He knew that. He knew it was just a matter of time before she left like everyone else. It was easier this way. He didn't have to constantly wonder when it would all collapse around him; he didn't have to fear losing her if he never had her. It made sense – he was grateful for it. At least, that was what he convinced himself.
He stayed and he listened. He listened to Poe call her a traitor and a liar, accuse her of being naïve and manipulated, and demand she swear her loyalty. Of course, she had chosen the Resistance, that was no surprise. But... she had defended him. Facing punishment, she had still insisted he was worthy of salvation. She had even attempted to warn him when Poe asked her to lure him into a trap. It was foolish, but it meant something to him, nonetheless. Even if she hadn't warned him, he would have still shown up for her. It was his fault they had confronted her in the first place. And, no matter her intentions, she had shown up on the Supremacy for him. He had planned to negotiate for her life; he was the one with the power, after all, but the moment Poe held a blaster to her temple, Kylo had become every bit the monster they believed he was. His fear and hatred had blinded him, as it had on Crait, and he remembered little else of the confrontation.

He remembered little, except her kiss with Poe and the loyalty she swore to him after he had threatened her life. That image was burned into the skin on the back of his eyelids. He didn't know why it affected him so profoundly this time; for a moment, he feared the Finalizer had lost artificial gravity and was listing dangerously. He found the strength to remain standing, to fight for her safety as he fell apart inside, but then she lied and told him that she loved him. It was a one-two punch, and he was a goner.

Any pain he had ever felt before paled in comparison. He knew he would never recover, and part of him didn't want to, because it meant forgetting her. He wanted to be angry, and it was necessary to pretend when faced with his enemies. But it wasn't anger that he felt. Or betrayal. Or hatred. He had never felt this overwhelming feeling before. It tore at his insides. It left him weak, exposed, and vulnerable. He wasn't certain if he was going to be sick or die, but neither surprised him. It was everything he hated.

He didn't know why he saved Dameron. It was instinctual, mostly. Perhaps part of it was because it would have hurt Rey to watch the man she obviously cared for die. He wouldn't contemplate whether it had anything to do with the nagging guilt he felt from the lasting effects of his torture. Whatever the reason, before he had considered the consequences, he stopped the glowing beam of plasma from connecting with its intended target. With that single act, he revealed his weakness. Knowing he would not kill them gave them the upper hand. Kylo realized his mistake the second before Dameron fired the blaster. He wouldn't make that mistake again. He would kill them all. She was in danger with the Resistance, and nothing else mattered. When Dameron had made him believe for that split second that he had lost her, the general had signed his own death warrant.

They would be expecting Kylo to come for them on Barkhesh. But not Dantooine.

The rage that clawed and carved and slashed through him as he stood in the debris of his chambers was his oldest friend. He had spent most of his youth attempting desperately to contain it, fearing the darkness that it would unleash. It was all-consuming, blinding, a satisfying loss of control that bordered on insanity. He couldn't see straight or think straight or do anything at all but bend to its will. It would only be obeyed. It was order in a chaotic war between two opposing forces that tore him apart yet held him together. It was always there, right underneath the skin, watching, waiting, until the spark was ignited. The fire intensified into an inferno until it burned him alive from the
inside. The only reprieve, the only relief, was to release it all. To feed the monster within, to lash out, to destroy. The power within, the darkness, would slowly kill him if he didn't let it out, and rage had been his only outlet.

Rage... rage was comforting. It was familiar, it was easy, it was everything his other emotions were not. Pain was his only language; pain was how he lived, how he survived. He never realized the weight of the pain he carried until he found the comfort of burning rage. The pain, the suffering, every emotion that festered and churned inside him was replaced by rage. In those moments, when every nerve was alight in a burning blaze, he drifted close to a temporary peace.

His life revolved around it, or, at least, it had before Rey. It was with rage that he sought to destroy his past, that he forced civilizations into submission, eliminating all who opposed him. Destroying the Resistance—perhaps that would finally grant him the peace he had always craved. He straightened to his full height, smoothing down his tunic. As he walked through his quarters, his eyes settled on his discarded helmet in the corner of his room. He knew how she hated it when he wore it. He lifted it from its resting place and placed it over his head roughly; its considerable weight was not as painful to endure as the emotional burden it carried. Kylo stopped when he nearly stepped on the pile of black material on his floor. He grabbed the cloak and whipped it around his shoulders. Leaving his room in ruins, he stalked with deadly purpose to the bridge.

“It’s time to finish this once and for all.”
Chapter End Notes

Description of past violence
Description of manipulated kiss
Jealousy
A Trade

Chapter Notes

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“Rey?”

Rey awoke to a spinning sensation. Her mind was sluggish and her body numb. The stone felt cold beneath her back. When her eyes fluttered open, the meager contents of her room came into focus. Had she been on her makeshift bed, she would have thought it all a dream. Her head felt heavy as she lifted herself off the floor, her ears buzzing with... no, it wasn't her ears buzzing. It was a particle shield blocking the exit of her room. They had effectively locked her in her room as they prepared to leave for Dantooine. Finn stood sentinel on the opposite side of the blue energy shield. And if she was imprisoned, that meant Kylo...

“Ben!” She jumped to her feet, searching frantically in the small space before searching the other visible rooms through the particle shield. Her connection to the Force wavered as she struggled with another bout of dizziness. She couldn’t search for him in the Force and he was nowhere to be found. Poe was also missing. Was Poe torturing Kylo? Had he killed him the moment she collapsed? Every possible scenario she imagined grew increasingly more grave for her bondmate. “Ben!”

“He disappeared back to... wherever he was the second Poe stunned you,” Finn said quietly. Poe had switched his blaster to stun, well, that explained why she felt out of sorts – why she had collapsed. “General, she’s awake,” he said into his comlink.

“Traitor,” she said, voice low in betrayal.

“What did you expect me to do?” he shouted, turning to strike the energy barrier between them. “You left me no choice! You put my life, Rose's life, all our lives at risk! For him, Rey! If this was me carrying on a relationship with Phasma or Poe with Hux, I wonder what your reaction would have been? I tried to reason with you; I tried to give you the chance to do the right thing! Please, Rey, tell me what you would do have done?”

She stared defiantly across the barrier between them. “I wouldn't have betrayed you.”

“You already did,” he said softly, backing away from the vibrating blue energy. “You chose him over me.”

“I didn’t!” Rey pounded the barrier with her fists. Tears and anger blurred her vision. “You said
you were my friend, but you turned me over to Poe to get stunned and imprisoned!”

“In my defense, the plan worked perfectly,” Poe said from down the corridor. He hadn’t entered her limited vision yet, but she knew he was smiling.

Finn stepped closer to whisper, “I am you friend and that is why I did it. This is for your own good, Rey,” before backing himself against the far wall and crossing his arms. When Poe appeared – smiling – Finn nodded in deference. Her best friend made his loyalties clear; he firmly sided with the Resistance. Her fate was left in the hands of the general, who leaned against the particle shield on both hands, staring at her with an amusement that didn’t fit the situation.

“Let me out!” she demanded. He shook his head slowly, his smile growing wider. “You shot me! You can’t just do that to people, Poe!”

“I can, I’m the general. You and Snoke are the only people I’ve seen him that blindingly loyal to.” There was something calculating in his eyes as he studied her. He pushed off the shield and shrugged his shoulders flippantly. “I played the cards I had.”

“He saved you!” she shouted over the hum of the vibrating energy. “You could have turned him and ended the war! Now…” She wiped away her thoughts of consequences as she wiped away her tears. “What you did was evil, Poe.”

His smile fell as his face hardened, and she thought for a moment he would leave without another word. Instead, he squared his shoulders and pressed his finger against the barrier between them. “You committed treason, Rey, I had cause to shoot you with a lethal bolt. You should be thanking me. You think it’s evil? Fine. But it was a necessary evil. It’s war. I tried to be understanding, because you came from nowhere and had no idea about what we’re up against, but I’m not going to sit by and watch the Resistance die because you want to screw the enemy. I will do whatever it takes to stand up against the em… the First Order to answer the call to free the galaxy. Just like my parents did. They spent my childhood fighting the war to save the Republic and I will do anything to make sure that what they sacrificed will not be in vain. Anything. Do you understand?”

What happened to you? How could you defend this?

Her thoughts about a different man – a man on the opposite side of the war – replayed in her mind. He does these horrible things, and I thought he just doesn't care that he’s wrong, but that's not it. He does these horrible things and convinces himself that he’s right. He doesn't see this as evil. He doesn’t see himself as wrong. He truly believes in what he is saying... which is terrifying.
“And what about the Hutts?” she argued. “Are they a necessary evil, too?” Rey knew all too well that arguing ideals with the misguided didn’t end well, but as long as she was a prisoner and his actions endangered the Resistance, she had to try.

His attention was drawn away from his prisoner. He leveled an accusatory look at Finn, but his words were still directed toward her. “How do you know about the Hutts?”

“I didn't until you just confirmed it,” she said hastily, striking the barrier between them to draw his attention back to her. Finn may have abandoned her, but this was her fault. She wouldn’t allow him to be thrown in a cell next to her, not when he had committed treason to protect her. “I overheard you speaking to someone in one of the empty rooms. I repeated a phrase to Ben, and he told me it was Huttse... You lied to me, too.”

Poe glared at her through the blue energy. His lip curled in anger. “I had reason to lie to you. Good reason, as it turns out, considering you've sworn your loyalty to a monster.”

“You say I have sworn loyalty to a monster, but don't you see, General, so have you. The Hutts are the very thing that is wrong with this galaxy; they are what Ben is fighting against. As misguided as his method is – ”

“No!” Poe shouted. Catching himself before continuing, he took a steadying breath as he checked the halls for anyone who had noticed the disturbance. When he spoke again, it was in a harsh whisper. “He is trying to take over the galaxy. They are standing with us when no one else will. The enemy of our enemy is our ally here, Rey, regardless of the difference in philosophies we may or may not share.”

Rey did not share his desire to keep their confrontation a secret from the others. “They want to kill all Jedi! They nearly killed Luke and Leia! That's not a 'difference in philosophy!'”

“And Kylo Ren succeeded in killing them both,” Poe spat back, his face centimeters from the barrier. “You think he doesn't want to kill the Jedi? His nickname at the First Order is 'Jedi Killer!'”

Rey stepped closer until their faces were only separated by the vibrating energy field. “Where is my place, General, if my allies would kill me as easily as my enemies?”
Poe rested his arm above his head against the barrier. He leaned his head against his forearm, staring at her with a sudden openness. Was the hardened, callous general just a front? Was he as lost as she was? Was the Poe she thought he was still in there? “I have no plans of bringing you anywhere near the Hutts,” he murmured.

This was her chance to break through to him. She swallowed her anger. “So, what now—you're just going to leave me here to die?”

“Of course not.” Poe pushed away from the barrier. His derisive demeanor returned as if his gentle words had only been an illusion. “He’s likely already set course here. You’re far too valuable to leave behind. Maybe I should stay here with you to wait for him, but I’d rather bring you with us and draw him into a trap. Go ahead, warn him, I’m counting on it. Or don’t. It doesn’t matter either way. I will see the death of Kylo Ren, I promise you that.”

And what if I won’t fight him, Poe? Will you stand as loyally by my side as I’ve stood by yours if I have a different vision to end the First Order? Or am I only worth anything to you because you believe I am the sole person strong enough in the Force to kill him?

With a nod to Finn, Poe began walking back the way he had come. Evidently, he had decided the conversation was over. She couldn’t let him go; Kylo’s life depended on it.

Rey could warn her bondmate, but, after the war room, she knew he wouldn’t listen. The man was so stubborn, he would willingly walk into a trap. Poe would use her to kill the man she loved if she didn't find another option. “Wait,” she begged, her voice too loud for the space. “Please, Poe, I am loyal to the Resistance. I am the only Force-sensitive you have. I can help you!” The words tasted bitter, like a lie, on her tongue. She was still loyal to them, wasn’t she?

The echo of boots on the stone floor indicated that she had given herself a chance. That’s all she needed. She would do anything to protect her bondmate. Poe reappeared in her line of sight, hands in his pockets, walking slowly as he studied her. “Prove it,” he said. “Give me intel on Kylo Ren. Something that proves I can trust you.”

There was no conflict in her heart. Rey was imprisoned, she was desperate. Kylo already hated her for what she said to Poe, his life was already in danger. What further harm could the intel possibly cause? He would understand, she was doing what she had to do to protect them both. Rey didn't have information on Kylo's whereabouts, nor did she trust Poe with that information. Whatever it was, it had to be something good, something big, to convince him to trust her. But she had to be careful. Anything she provided him, she needed to make certain it couldn't be used to threaten the life of her bondmate.
She thought back to every connection with Kylo, seeking the one piece of information that would prove her loyalty and keep her bondmate safe from her friends. She scanned her room in desperation until her eyes settled on the makeshift flowerpot…and the perfect diversion.

“I am loyal to you, Poe,” she said demurely. “I don’t agree with an alliance with the Hutts, but I could still help the Resistance. Though we don’t agree on strategy, my calling will always be to save the galaxy from the First Order.” She glanced up at Poe through her lashes; he was listening. “I have a vial that I received from Kylo Ren during my mission as an offer of trust. It contains the genetically modified Blue Shadow Virus that will destroy his new clone army on Kamino. And only those clones. Without an army, I can… arrange a meeting for negotiations. We can take him prisoner. I can work to turn him under the watchful eye of the Resistance.” Giving Poe the vial was perfect. It could be used for good. Eventually, it would be used to destroy the army that threatened the lives of her friends, long after she convinced Kylo to leave the First Order. Because he would leave; she believed that. In return, she would earn her freedom and gain a chance to protect Kylo from the Resistance. Rey had no intention of meeting him for negotiations or taking him prisoner. She would never trust Poe with Kylo’s life after what he did. But she hoped Poe believed she would.

“An ambush is more practical,” Poe replied, shaking his head. But it wasn’t resolution that she saw in his eyes. She could still convince him. “I’m not sending you to meet with the Supreme Leader with no ability to defend yourself.”

“I’ll have a weapon.” Her mouth was working faster than her strategizing thoughts, but the Force was guiding her to something, she could feel it.

A lightsaber – I need a lightsaber – but how?

"What weapon? Your broken one?” Poe raised one eyebrow, clearly suspicious of the validity of her claim. The Force guided her to focus on his question. Yes, the broken one. Her lightsaber was broken, and she was good at two things; waiting, and….

"I can fix it. It needs a new Kyber Crystal – "

"– From the crystal caves of Ilum," he finished. “You would have to travel to Ilum, and everyone knows that Ilum is the world that…” he paused, a smile playing on his lips. It reminded her of the expression he wore when he spoke of victory in his stories. He cleared his throat. “The world where the Jedi find their crystals.”

I’ve been searching everywhere through the Jedi Texts, but nothing was written about where to find
them. How does he know where to find them?

He must have seen the confusion scrunched between her brows. "The Force and Jedi are not completely foreign to me, Rey," Poe said, answering her thoughts. "Luke Skywalker and my mother fought together in the war. Luke recovered two pieces of the Great Tree from the Jedi temple on Coruscant. He kept one and gave one to my mother. I grew up playing on that Force-sensitive tree, hearing stories about the Jedi from my mother. The crystal caves of Ilum are the most sacred place to every Jedi, because that is where the padawans found the Kyber crystals for their lightsabers. We'll need a working lightsaber to force him to surrender, but this could work."

"Thank you," she smiled weakly. "After I return from Ilum, I will release the vial on the clones on Kamino, then draw Kylo Ren into negotiations."

Poe removed the rods and bases that created the particle shield. “Dantooine is on the other side of the galaxy. For obvious reasons, we can't take the Hydian Way even though it cuts straight across. We'll have to chance it in the uncharted territories. The Wilds are dangerous, but the Unknown regions are, well, unknown. There are no mapped hyperspace routes, and no one knows what else is out there. But Maz has given us specific navigational routes along the western route that avoid secret First Order travel lanes. I don't know how she got them. I don't know anyone who has even been in the Unknown regions, let alone figured out where the First Order would be out there. But she found it with the supplies on Dantooine, and she's given the Resistance our last chance. She and her crew will also be shuttling us all there. You'll stay with us until Ilum, then continue on that route to Dantooine when you find the crystal. You can leave this cell freely, under two conditions."

Rey swallowed thickly. She didn’t much care for Poe’s ultimatums. “And those are…?”

“No more contact with Kylo Ren until the negotiations.”

It was a reasonable request, she supposed. Rey reminded herself that Kylo was their enemy and speaking to him was treason. It was impossible to guarantee, however, unless she shut out the bond – something she refused to do to Kylo – but she would say whatever Poe asked her to say to get out of the cage and away from him. “Okay. And?”

“You hand me that vial in good faith.”

Her heart stuttered and her stomach churned. She never had any intention of handing Poe that vial. Perhaps he knew that. Just as they both knew his demand wasn’t about loyalty. What he was truly asking of her was to betray Kylo. “You still don't trust me?”
“Would you if you were in my position?” If she wanted her freedom, if she wanted the chance to keep Kylo far away from the Resistance, she had no other choice but to give it to him. She knelt next to the flower she had saved and dug into the red dirt to expose the hidden vial. She gathered her other few belongings quickly into a box before turning to Poe.

“There,” she dropped the vial in front of him—its likely descent to the ground saved by his quick reflexes—and pushed past him. “You might want to check that it’s closed correctly. I’d hate for you to catch the virus and die a long, horrible death,” she shouted as she left down the long hallway.

“As hilarious as that would be, I doubt Ren was stupid enough to clone me!” he called after her. “Oh, and make sure to take the Millennium Falcon!”

When she was out of sight, he grabbed Finn by the arm. He checked the corridors before whispering his orders. "You're her friend. Go with her. Keep an eye on her; make sure she is not planning something else with Ren."

Finn glared back in anger. He was caught between two people he believed were wrong. “She swore her loyalty to you, gave you that vial…you still don't trust her?”

“Not for a second,” he scoffed. “She was 'Ben... Ben... Ben...’ until she realized I wasn't going to release her, and then it was 'Kylo Ren' in the same breath she swore her loyalty. But this is better than waiting for him to come to us. When we reach the safety of Dantooine, I'm going to go find every ally that we have. This is it, Finn. This is how we win.”

“What is?”

“She is,” he said, smiling in excitement. “I was so focused on her feelings for him that I missed what was right in front of my eyes. Something she said never sat right with me, and now I know why. She said Kylo Ren never tortured her, even though she had seen the map. He looked through her dreams instead of finding the one thing he desperately wanted. Then a Sith who can freeze blaster bolts like it's nothing lost a battle to a girl who never held a lightsaber before? No, he didn't want to kill her.”

“The Supreme Leader of the First Order was in bed with her last night, he protected her from us, he lost his mind when she kissed me! He has some sick, twisted attraction to her! He trusted her with a vial that could destroy his entire army. Ren doesn't trust anybody, but he trusts her. When she
betrayed him – *that* was when he made his mistake. What deadly mistake will he make if he thinks she betrayed him again? This is huge, Finn; this is what we've been waiting for!” he laughed, clapping his friend on the back.

“We can use this to our advantage. Go with her. The next time Kylo Ren shows up in this Force thing and is... distracted... with her, don't hesitate, *kill him*. We'll see if Rey told you the truth about the blaster bolt not touching him. If it doesn't or if he freezes the bolt, grab *her*. Put the blaster to her head. Tell him he comes alone, or she dies blah blah blah. Trust me, he'll know exactly where to find her. We can use her as bait. We'll ambush him. Once we take down the Supreme Leader, that leaves the First Order vulnerable to attack. Then I'll lead the allies into an airstrike on the *Finalizer*. We can end this war, Finn. You can have your friend back.” Poe shoved a blaster into his hand.

“What about the vial?”

“I'm already planning a rendezvous with the Hutts on the way to Dantooine,” he said. “Maybe I’ll take a detour.”
Enlightenment on the Bridge

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Kylo had only just stepped out into the corridor when the droid caught up with him. He hadn’t spoken to the little traitor since he had protected the other BB unit in the war room. Not that there was much chance to speak when he was systematically destroying his quarters. The droid may have been naïve, but he was no fool. When he strung together his question in binary, Kylo sensed his cautiousness.

“I’m going to the Command Bridge, setting course to Dantooine, and destroying the Resistance once and for all,” he told the astromech. Without missing a beat, the droid repeated his favorite question – why?
“Because they almost *killed* her.” Blue was relentless, however. He could never just take an answer at face value. He was always poking and prodding, forcing Kylo to answer questions that positively unbalanced him.

“No, she won’t leave. She’s *loyal* to them.”

The memory of her kissing Poe and swearing loyalty to a man who nearly *killed* her replayed in his mind. Why couldn’t the droid let it go? Blue continued with his questioning, despite Kylo’s quickly escalating agitation. “I only plan to take her prisoner, and, yes, I trust them not to hurt her because I am their Supreme Leader!”

Kylo was sick of the questions. First Rey, then the droid, did everything in their power to destabilize him – tempt him from his certain destiny – and then they betrayed him. His problems ended with the destruction of the Resistance. He had been distracted on Crait, but Luke wouldn’t be there to save them this time.

He imagined Rey’s stricken face when he arrived on Dantooine as he had on Crait – when he did what she had always feared he would do – but he shook it from his mind. He couldn’t concentrate on those foolish thoughts. As Supreme Leader, he had a job to do. Nothing else mattered… or at least, it shouldn’t have. His thundering heart wouldn’t allow him to forget the significance of what he was about to do. His emotions were spiraling. It was the droid’s persistent questions that he blamed for his instability.

“No, Blue! Imprisonment is *not* worse than death!” He stopped as the lie twisted in his stomach. Looking away, he slowly exhaled the anger that had been building. “It doesn’t matter if it is; it’s the only way I can ensure that neither the Order nor the Resistance kills her.”

If the droid knew what was good for him, he would have let the matter drop, but he continued needling him with questions. “*I have* asked her. She will not leave her ‘family.’”

The droid’s final question finally pushed him over the edge.

“I can’t leave!” he seethed, turning toward the droid, the unlucky outlet for his unstable emotions. “And I wouldn’t have to do *any* of this if it weren’t for you! She almost *died* because of you!” He could plainly see that his words were hurtful to the young droid, but he couldn’t stop himself as the darkness coursed through his veins. It fed on the anger and fear until he was intoxicated under its power. “She could have died for a *droid*. But you don’t care, do you; you just had to protect the enemy! For what? The droid was protecting his master; where were you? Where were you when they were firing upon *me*? You’re not loyal to the First Order or me or anyone except your own
kind who would kill you for his master if he was so ordered. You want the fighting to end, but it will never stop! You understand? Never! And until you get that, you’re a liability to her… and me.”

The droid rolled forward, pleading, but Kylo wouldn’t hear it.

“No! I’m done with your foolish questions! Just… leave me alone! You’re fixed, go find another master! My life was easier without you in it!”

He regretted it the instant the words left his lips, filling the void between them with poison. The droid turned and sped away, his domed head sloped forward in anguish. Kylo almost called after him, but he swallowed the plea for forgiveness. He knew the truth; the droid was better off without him. Kylo would likewise be better off without the droid, it only ever served to be a distraction. The remorse and sorrow that flooded his system could be used for strength. He refused to ponder the loss; he had a mission to complete. Turning away, he channeled his self-loathing into the anger he needed. He would finish it.

All of this is your fault, Dameron. I’ll kill you.

Kylo stormed onto the bridge, startling every officer with his presence. “Set course to –”

“Barkhesh?” Hux stepped forward from the corner of the room. Kylo took a half-step back. His resolution was replaced by fear. “We’re already on course to Barkhesh,” the general said with a smile. Kylo was grateful for the mask. He had no doubt that the shock he felt had flickered across his face. “But you already knew that, didn’t you Supreme Leader? You were the one to order an alteration in course. Pray tell, what will we find on Barkhesh?”

His hatred for Dameron was secondary to preventing mutiny. No, if Hux discovered what he did, it wasn’t just ensured mutiny—it was treason. “I have reason to believe the Resistance is regrouping on Barkhesh,” he said evenly.

Kylo bit his tongue as Hux cackled mirthlessly. When the general finished, he straightened. The look on his face was predacious. He was out for blood. “Funny, isn’t it?”

“What is?”
Hux clasped his hands behind his back and sauntered deliberately to the viewport. “That my intelligence had narrowed down the likelihood of their new base on Barkhesh, but you were adamant about poisonous insects.” He stopped, turning to glare at Kylo. “What changed your mind?”

As Hux continued his stroll to the viewport, Kylo tried to temper his raging emotions. He should be irritated and flippant with his subordinate, but he was doing his best not to allow the fear to bleed through the vocoder. “The Resistance has likely been on the move. I was made aware by... an anomaly in the Force.”

“The general is dead.” Hux said provocingly, knowing what Kylo had endured the day before. “Is the Jedi girl with them?”

“I believe so,” he answered through clenched teeth. Hux stared at him questioningly for a moment, suspicion blooming in his eyes. A new wave of fear crashed over his senses, and he searched for darkness to gain control again. He breathed in the cold, all-consuming power. When he spoke again, his voice was steady. “I felt it in the Force.”

Hux was too cheerful for his consequential words. “When did you order the change in course?”

“Why does that matter?” he challenged. Kylo considered choking the man to distract from the line of questioning and relieve the anxiety building under his skin.

“Because, Supreme Leader, it’s curious. When I left the bridge, we were on course to Kessel to reevaluate the sanctions you imposed upon them. I find you in the training room, pick you up off the floor, drag you directly to your chambers, turn off your master comms...” That was it. That was why he had not been alerted to the change in course. His Master Comms had been off; he hadn’t received the transmission. There would be little time to warn them, but, knowing Dameron, they had already evacuated to their new base. “And yet,” Hux continued, “imagine my surprise when I intercepted a reconnaissance squad outside your quarters, clearly affected by Force wizardry with their repetitive, mechanized answers. Then I return to the bridge to discover that – in the few minutes since I had left your chambers – the course had changed, and you had altered it.”

“I felt it in the Force when my mother died,” he answered impulsively. The darkness in him swelled with the lie, calling for more. “When I realized the implication of what I felt, I contacted the bridge immediately.”

“Is that so?” There was the slightest bit of irritation to the general’s tone. “Well then, Supreme Leader. When you walked onto this bridge a moment ago, you asked for a change of course. Where
was the destination, if not the location of the Resistance?” Hux had caught him. If he didn’t give him Dantooine – something worth deviating from a course to their greatest enemy – he would confirm everything Hux suspected.

Kylo could easily explain that the Resistance had left Barkhesh after encountering the troopers and that he had received intel of their new base. It would ease Hux’s suspicion. It would end Poe Dameron, the traitor, and his mother’s ridiculous legacy. They deserved it for what they had done. It would be doing Rey a favor. She might not be lucky enough to survive their wrath the next time. He had left his chambers with the resolve to end the war, to give the Order the coordinates to Dantooine, and end the conflict. One word—three syllables—and he would have his peace.

“Nal Hutta,” he answered instead. The vocoder in his mask deepened, leveling his voice into a confident tone. Even as he said it, he didn’t know why he hadn’t given them Dantooine. As deeply as the darkness in him called for him to end it, he couldn’t allow the Order to find that base. He refused to contemplate it further. He would end them, but not yet. There was a more pressing, internal issue that had to be solved first. Kylo convinced himself his time would be better spent in the archives than on the battlefield. “An informant has revealed to me that the Hutt cartel has formed an alliance with the Resistance. Without their support, the remaining Resistance members will be easy targets.”

Hux stood still, spluttering, before remembering himself. “Yes, Supreme Leader. I will arrange a flotilla to engage Nal Hutta, and we will stay our course to Barkhesh. Is it your order for planetary annihilation?” The Hutts had enslaved Kylo’s mother, frozen his father in Carbonite; there was no love lost for those creatures. Could he be responsible for the extermination of an entire civilization? Another Alderaan? Hosnian Prime? Could he forgive himself? The darkness swelled inside him as he held the fate of an entire civilization in his hand.

“Yes. Annihilate Nal Hutta.”
Chapter End Notes

Implied mass murder
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"Rey, wait!" Rose called, out of breath from sprinting down the corridor. Rey turned with tears in her eyes. Before her friend could mention them, she wiped her emotions away. If Rose asked her why she cried, how would she answer? Were her tears formed in anger and betrayal at Poe? Betrayal but gratitude for Finn? Fear for the Resistance? Fear for Kylo? Frustration? Guilt? Conflict? She didn’t want anything to do with the Resistance, but Rose had never been anything but kind to her. Reluctantly, she waited. When Rose caught up to her, she smiled. "I'm coming with you."

"What?" It was surprising, certainly, but also heart-warming. After everything Rey had done – after all the secrets her friend undoubtedly knew she kept – Rose still wanted to stand by her side. Rey didn’t want to be alone again, she needed someone to understand now more than ever, but she couldn’t be responsible for the peril her friend would face without the protection of the Resistance. "No, Rose; it's dangerous!"

"Which is exactly why you need your friends by your side," Rose said unequivocally. Her eyes were bright, warm, and sincere. Rey didn't deserve friends like that. She had lied to her. She had led her to believe that the man she loved was Leia’s son Ben Solo, not the dark lord Kylo Ren. Or at least, she had led her to believe they were not one in the same. It was her fault they were all in danger, yet Rose still wanted to help her. It didn’t make sense.

Rey shook her head adamantly. “I would never be able to forgive myself if anything terrible happened to you... because of me.”

"And I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if something terrible happened to you if I could have stopped it,” Rose replied, grasping Rey’s hand in hers. “You're the last Jedi. You give the Resistance hope. Like I told Finn, 'We won't win this war by killing what we hate, but by saving what we love.' I love you, Rey, and Finn loves you. Like I told you before, we're all family, and I'm here for you no matter what. I never thought that 'guy' you were talking about was Kylo Ren... it definitely would have been helpful to know before…” She winked at Rey, blushing slightly. “And, honestly, I don't understand it, but I don't have to. I will stand by you and help you fix your lightsaber so you can be the Jedi this galaxy so desperately needs.”

*The Jedi this galaxy so desperately needs...* what exactly was that? What if she didn’t want to be
what they needed her to be? Did the galaxy need someone to defeat Kylo Ren? Because the thought of staring him in the eyes with her lightsaber thrust through his heart tore an ache deep within her soul. It would be easier to end her own life than his. She couldn’t do it; not after the memories she witnessed, not when she loved him, not when she believed in who he truly was. She knew that the fate of the galaxy should matter more than one man’s life, but how can they expect her to kill someone who was a part of her? They only cared about winning, but how could she side with them when she loved him? “I don’t know if I can be the Jedi this galaxy desperately needs.”

Rose pulled her into a tight embrace. “I believe in you, Rey.” It was a strange sentiment; Rey didn’t even believe in herself. How could this woman believe in her after she had failed them all? Rey wondered if she would still believe in her if she refused to fight for the Resistance. But if she didn’t fight for the Resistance, what would she fight for? The First Order had to be destroyed. Could she abandon them all to a grim end at the hands of the man she loved? Or would she be forced to choose between her heart and the fate of the galaxy? Was it foolish to hope that Kylo would make the right choice when he had chosen time and again to remain with the First Order?

“I know I have to face the fact that I might not save him; he may choose not to be saved. But our destinies are intertwined. I believe that. Is it truly my destiny to kill him? Why would the Force bring us together, why would it show me his memories, why would it let me love him if I was only intended to kill him? Is this some cruel cosmic test? What if I fail? What if I refuse to kill him and save the galaxy? What if I succeed? How do I live with myself, knowing what I know, feeling what I feel? I don’t want this. I don’t want to choose. Where is my place, if not here? What do I choose? I don’t want the fate of the galaxy resting in my hands.

"Hey..." Finn said cautiously as he approached behind them. Rey released Rose and met his eyes. They hadn’t spoken since she was imprisoned and she didn’t know where they stood. She didn’t know where she wanted them to stand. Her heart was caught somewhere between begging him forgiveness for forcing him to commit treason for her and screaming at him for taking Poe’s side over hers.

It would have been so easy to condemn him, to give into the darkness that pleaded entry, but she knew it couldn’t be trusted. As long as she kept the darkness at bay, she kept Snoke at bay, and Kylo was safe. Even if she trusted herself to manage anger without the darkness, what was the point? The true difference between Finn and Kylo – why she had been more disappointed in her bondmate than anyone else in this war – was not morality as she had first assumed.

The difference between them was she believed Kylo could change. She may have gone about it the wrong way under darkness, but she had become so passionate because she knew he could be better. While she held disappointment in Finn, she knew he would never change his mind. His eyes confirmed everything she needed to know. They were guarded in a way she had never seen before. She didn’t have to be bonded to him to know he felt betrayed, and nothing she could say would change that.
"Hey, I just told Rey I'm going with her," Rose said with her arm around her shoulder. There was a tenacity to her tone that signaled her decision as final to both Finn and Rey.

Finn looked at Rey as if he feared her reaction but with a firmness that betrayed his resolution in his decision. "Okay, then I'm coming, too."
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Kylo stood in the archives, alone, staring at the holobooks as if they would give him the answer. Poe Dameron could wait, he convinced himself. Hux had begun to suspect his loyalty; his words were borderline mutinous. It was only a matter of time before he staged a coup and took command of the First Order. It was an inevitability. Kylo knew his days were numbered. *Force Destiny* had to be destroyed before then.
I will bow at Dameron’s feet before I allow them to complete Force Destiny.

That revolting thought earned a few holobooks thrown across the Archive floor. It was not lost on him that the last time he had been in that room, he had tried to end the bond. He had been unsuccessful, but he wished he hadn’t been. He wished he had never heard her say those treacherous words to him. He wished he had never met her.

Kylo would have pulled his lightsaber and destroyed something, but it would only serve as another reminder. Her hand had touched that hilt. She had touched more in his life than he cared to admit. Her light had threaded like roots into his very being. Her constant presence in his mind was distracting, but he swallowed down the pain like he did everything else.

That was how he found himself staring absently at the Sith teachings section, his emotions rolling just under the surface. If the Force Destiny was a dark side invention, then he would search for a dark side solution. The problem was, what would be strong enough to destroy something that had the power to give and take life? Certainly, there were bombs and lightsabers, but he couldn’t destroy the system controls in both Weapons Development and the Command Bridge before he was stopped. Destroying the ship would be easy, but it didn’t ensure the machine would be completely destroyed. There was also the problem of the other machine out there.

Kylo wanted to delay until the Knights joined him on the Finalizer. They could help him hold the bridge until he destroyed the machine. Jacen knew where the other Force Destiny was hidden. He had sent for them; if they made it back to him in time, he had a chance. Though the Knights were due any day, Kylo couldn’t stand idly by. The last time he had done that, he had watched the Order destroy Hosnian Prime. If he learned how the machine worked, he could destroy the machine itself. If he learned how it worked, he still had a chance if Sidious returned.

What is strong enough to destroy a machine that controls life?

The holobooks in the Archives covered general topics of dark side philosophy and history. What he needed couldn’t be found there. For an answer to his question, he would need access to teachings from the man who knew the secrets to life and death; Darth Plagueis. He needed the Science to Creating Life.

Unfortunately, the woman who had access to that text was someone he was not strong enough to face. She likely wouldn’t give him access to a text of dark teachings with her sole intent of turning him for his mother’s sake. Without that text, his only other option was talking to the man himself. The only problem was, he was long dead, and Kylo had no object imbued with the Sith Master’s lifeforce – not that he was foolish enough to bring back Plagueis to defeat Sidious, as tempting as
that was. No, there was no way to summon a dark lord for answers. Only…Kylo realized with a
shiver of awareness…there was.

**A holocron.**

If anyone knew where to find one, he knew the man who did. Would he help him? After what
Kylo had done, it wasn’t likely, but he remembered what the man had told him the last time he’d
seen him. *I’d do anything for you, kid, so don’t let this be the last time I see you.* Of course, the
answer to his troubles would lie with that man; one of the people he swore he couldn’t face again.
It was better than the alternative. Even if he refused to speak to him, it was worth a shot.

In his excitement, he turned toward his droid to share the first optimistic news he’d had since
learning of the machine. As he stared at the empty space where Blue should have been, his chest
tightened with guilt as he remembered what he had done.

“I wouldn’t have to be doing any of this if it weren’t for you! She almost died because of you!” he
had screamed in his rage. “Just… leave me alone! You’re fixed; go find another master! My life
was easier without you in it!”

Kylo closed his eyes and released a sharp exhale; he would have to research holocrons later. With a
curse, he pulled the holobook on holocrons from the shelves and stormed from the Archives. This
was not something he was very practiced in—apologizing sincerely—but as he followed the
corridors, he found himself trying to muster the right words in his head.

Blue had interfered with his confrontation with Poe Dameron, but not out of malice or betrayal—
Kylo knew that. He hadn’t meant what he said to the droid. Even if Blue never wanted to speak to
him again, because Force knew he deserved a better master, Kylo still wanted to tell him the truth.
The young droid had to know that none of it was his fault.

Kylo burst into his quarters with an apology on his tongue, but it didn’t take sensitivity to the Force
for him to know the droid wasn’t there. His stomach dropped. He had no idea where else the droid
would be; Blue had always waited patiently in his quarters or stayed loyally by his side. The ship
was vast enough for a droid to hide, but for a droid like him, he was surrounded by danger. If any
of the other officers found him, he would likely be disposed of immediately or admitted to Droid
Repair for “re-conditioning.”

Kylo had to find him first, but where?
When he left his quarters in poorly concealed panic, he collided with another officer. He caught the man with the Force from falling to the floor and recognized him as Lieutenant Mitaka. The lieutenant eyes were wide in fear as they dragged up to his. Clearly, he was not eager to see the Supreme Leader. Then again, who would be? “F…forgive me, sir,” the man stuttered. “I will be more careful in –”

“Lieutenant.”

When Kylo released him from his hold, Mitaka straightened and adjusted his uniform. “Yes, sir.”

“If you wanted to find a specific rogue droid on this ship, where would you start?” he asked in a steady tone, hoping it did not betray his fears. The First Order couldn’t know his sentiment for the droid, or Hux would use it against him.

“The LMS, sir?” And that is? He stared at his subordinate expectantly, brow raised slightly. “…the Locator Monitoring System?” Kylo blinked, his patience waning. “…It monitors the locator chips…that are installed in each droid, sir.”

“Where would I find it?”

“Oh… uh… I can,” Mitaka mumbled, fiddling with his datapad with trembling hands. Had the man always been so fearful of him? “Which droid are you searching for, sir?” Kylo shook his head. “Serial number? CID?” He bit his lip to prevent himself from taking his frustration out on the shaking lieutenant. “Okay, let’s start with series.”

“BB.” Then Kylo remembered the name the droid had been given, the name he hated. “BB-10XZ.”

“Oh, the reprogrammed BB-9E droid?” Mitaka asked, flipping quickly through logs on the screen. “It was the droid that discovered FN-2187 and the other Resistance sympathizers when they infiltrated the Supremacy. It was damaged in the attack. They tried memory wipes and updated drives and parts, but I thought the refurbishments failed. I swore they slated it for – ”

Kylo couldn’t suppress the contempt in his voice. “They threw him in a garbage compactor.”

The Lieutenant glanced up at him then, and there was something in his eyes other than fear, as if
for one moment he saw Kylo as something other than a monster. The idea was preposterous, considering what Kylo had done to him in his anger. His anger – that was what led to this mess in the first place. “Here,” he handed Kylo the datapad with something like understanding in his eyes. “It’s... he’s in Droid Decommissioning level three. That yellow flashing dot is the beacon on his chip.”

There was a soft smile on his face before he straightened his uniform and turned to continue down the corridor to his destination. “Good luck, sir.”

Kylo stood dumbfounded for a moment, staring after the retreating man’s back before his eyes returned to the datapad. The blinking yellow dot was stationary. Kylo could find him and explain...

*Droid Decommissioning.*

The droid’s location finally sank in. Blue was in danger. They had found him, and if Kylo didn’t intervene, they would destroy his chip. Maybe they would destroy him or maybe salvage him for parts. It didn’t matter; everything that made him Blue would be gone without that chip. If Kylo had his comlink, he would have ordered the department to suspend all operations. But he was already running down corridors, pushing past startled guards, and using the Force to propel the turbolift faster.

When he burst through blastdoors into level three of Droid Decommissioning, he could only imagine the feral beast with the booming voice that made every head in the place turn. “Where’s my droid!” He was certain his hair was wild, his eyes fierce, and his clothes disheveled from his panicked search. When no one answered, he tossed a row of hovering shelves across the room with the Force. His demand—“everyone out, right now”—was likely unnecessary. They looked ready to bolt from the moment they recognized him.

They were out of the vast room before their tools had hit the floor. “Blue!” he shouted, searching the tables for the droid. “Blue, I’m here; where are you?” Blue was nowhere to be seen. Kylo checked the logs, he checked the scans, he checked every droid on the floor. The locator put him in that department, but it didn’t help pinpoint an exact location. There were no BB units slated for decommissioning, his chip ID had not been scanned in, there was not a single astromech to be found. The locator had tracked him there, but then he had just... vanished.

*Where did they take him?*

“Blue?”
Was he too late? His last words to the droid replayed over and over in his head as he searched every last storage room in the department, calling the droid’s chosen name with no response. The final storage room contained only old scrap parts. Upon finding the room empty of the droid, he collapsed against the wall, his head in his hands. He had no idea where to go or where else to look. The locater had brought him there. Lifting the datapad, he stared at the blinking yellow dot. “Where are you, Blue?” he asked, tapping the yellow dot. The dot began pulsing, and a shrill beeping erupted nearby. It wasn’t coming from the datapad but from something deeper in the room.

Kylo stood immediately and stepped forward between the shelves in search of the origin of that sound. As he neared a collection of junk astromechs, he heard the softest whimper. “Blue?”

Dipping down, he spotted the young BB unit hiding behind the shells of other astromechs. “Come out,” he murmured. “Please.” The droid didn’t respond, nor did he acquiesce to Kylo’s appeal. Kylo couldn’t see him in the darkness, but he heard the whirring of his internal gyroscopic propulsion system driving the droid further into the corner. “I just want to talk.”

Kylo didn’t have a glowrod, so he used the next best thing: the Force. With a snap of his fingers, he produced a small, orange flame from the palm of his hand. He moved his hand into the cramped space in an attempt to see the droid. At once, a blue flame joined his orange one in the darkness. The mechanical whir of the droid’s tool arm cut through the silence to bring the flame closer. The two flames danced together but never blended. They were both unique and the same. The droid trilled in wonder. Kylo pulled his hand back toward himself, and the droid followed. When he had finally coaxed him out of the cramped space, Kylo leaned against a shelf as the droid quietly observed the behavior of the flickering flames.

“Did they hurt you?” he murmured, shattering the silence. The droid answered quietly. It wasn’t what he had expected. It had never crossed his mind that the droid hadn’t been taken against his will. He had brought himself to decommissioning on purpose.

The only word that had the strength to push past the lump in Kylo’s throat was, “Why?”

Blue answered in a series of sorrowful beeps. Kylo was immediately angry again, but not at the droid. He had shouted at the droid, he had told him to “go away,” he had made the droid feel that he wasn’t wanted, that his life would be better if the droid no longer existed. Kylo understood that feeling better than anyone. What made the bile rise in his throat and tears burn in his eyes was that, knowing how those thoughts could tear someone apart, he had put the droid through it too. And for what? Because he was angry?
“Nothing that happened before was your fault, Blue,” he said. He leaned his head back against the shelf behind him, studying the different droid parts so he wouldn’t have to look at the droid. “My life would not be better without you in it. When I found out you were here, I was… scared. I would never have forgiven myself if something bad happened to you.”

Instead of answering, a flickering holorecording played in the space between them. “I can’t leave!” Kylo shouted in the recording, turning toward the projector. He looked… like a monster as he loomed over the droid; all fire, venomous words, and sharp edges. In the moment, it was easier to just feel, to surrender to the will of the darkness. Seeing himself from the outside, however, made his stomach churn. The man on the holorecording wasn’t powerful or strong or worth his title. He was no better than his former master. He wanted it to stop; he wanted to take back what he’d said, change it, but he was forced to watch the truth instead.

“And I wouldn’t have to be doing any of this if it weren’t for you! She almost died because of you!” Kylo had never seen himself from the outside before. It made him hate everything that he was even more. He could barely stand to watch himself, knowing the wrath that would come. Even though he remembered the words, he wasn’t prepared to see it, to experience it second-hand. “She could have died for a droid. But you don’t care, do you? You just had to protect the enemy! For what? The droid was protecting his master; where were you? Where were you when they were firing upon me? You’re not loyal to the First Order or me or anyone except your own kind who would kill you for his master if he was so ordered. You want the fighting to end, but it will never stop! You understand? Never! And until you get that, you’re a liability to her… and me.”

Kylo had been ruthless and purposefully cruel. He didn’t deserve for the droid to beg him to reconsider, to hold faith in him when he allowed the darkness to control him, as Blue had. The droid stood by him when anyone else would have walked away, and he was rewarded with the full extent of Kylo’s callous words. “No! I’m done with your foolish questions! Just… go away! You’re fixed; go find another master! My life was easier without you in it!” The holorecording flickered out, and they were cast into silence.

The droid beeped quietly.

No, Blue, I don’t see. Because it’s a lie.

He knew what it was like to be at the receiving end of someone else’s darkness; he knew how deeply words could cut. Unlike himself, Blue didn’t deserve those lies. Was this how others saw him? Was this how Rey saw him? This thunderstorm of uncontrolled emotion? He felt lost. Adrift. He didn’t know who he was anymore, but this wasn’t who he wanted to be. It hadn’t mattered before that he was a monster; when it was him against the galaxy, he wanted them all to see him as a redoubtable opponent. He had convinced himself that he only cared about power and revenge, but now...
Kylo cared more about the droid than he did himself. He couldn’t allow him to believe those lies. “Blue, I said those things, but that’s not how I feel. You have to believe me; you’re important to me. I would be… sad if you were gone.”

Blue’s retort fueled his self-loathing.

“No! I lied, okay? I shouldn’t have said that; I didn’t mean it.” His mother’s voice echoed in his mind from a memory a lifetime before: *people never lie to the ones they love*. It was those words that had convinced him that his family had never loved him, but he realized now that "always" and "never" were not real. Life was complicated and messy, and he had made a mistake.

“Sometimes when people are angry, they say things that are not true. I don’t deserve for you to believe me, but you deserve better than to believe lies. The truth is, I don’t think any of that. I was angry at that Resistance general and Rey and myself, but I took it out on you. I’m sorry.” When he was young, he was told he apologized too much. Since turning to the First Order, Kylo couldn’t remember the last time he had apologized.

Blue chirped, reigniting his flame. His question was hopeful.

“I promise, Blue, I would miss you like I miss the girl. I came for you, didn’t I?” It was the truth. The droid’s persistent questions irritated him on an hourly basis, but Kylo found the moments alone on that destroyer in conferences and negotiations surprisingly empty. He had been alone his whole life, but somehow that ball of bolts had wormed his way into Kylo’s cold, dark heart. If Blue was gone, he would miss him more than he cared to admit. It was different, of course, from the way he missed Rey. He cared for Blue, but he… he felt something more for her; something he had never felt for anyone before.

It was a terrifying thought, one he refused to ponder on the floor of a droid scrap room as he tried to convince his only friend of his worth. Kylo reignited his own flame in his palm and blended it with the blue flame at the end of the droid’s tool arm. They sat in companionable silence, lost to their own thoughts as they watched the soothing flicker of burning energy.

“Blue, did you store more recordings in your archives?”
Chapter End Notes

Fear of injury or death to a droid
Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
The ominous clouds thundered overhead, bright flashes of purple filling the sky. The rain was thick, obscuring his vision as Poe slinked along the edge of the raised platforms. His eyes drifted to the waves several stories below him. He couldn’t see them, but he knew they were there. He heard them crashing, waiting for an easy misstep. He had never been to Kamino, and he wouldn’t care if he never returned. Not that he cared if he returned to any planet. Moving to a new planet every year as his parents followed the Republic Capitol ensured that he found a home in people, rather than places; becoming a pilot had ensured his heart would forever belong to the stars.

The rain was pouring as he approached the building intel had suggested was the Cloning facility. Poe hated rain; it reminded him of the day his mother died. She had given everything to the
rebellion, and, in turn, the Republic. It was her legacy. He would be damned if he allowed anyone to destroy that legacy, especially the likes of Kylo Ren. The former prodigal son of two of the greatest heroes of the rebellion had been given everything. Ben Solo had wanted for nothing. He was blessed to be raised by legends and even train under one with his uncle. Then one night he went crazy, killed all his fellow students, and left to join the very evil his family had fought against. He’d thrown it all away for power, no different than his criminal grandfather. Kylo was proof that some people were just born evil. He was everything that was wrong with the galaxy, and Poe would destroy him, just as his parents and the other brave fighters of the rebellion destroyed his grandfather.

After Starkiller, it had seemed that the Resistance finally had the advantage in the fierce orphan named Rey. She had defeated Kylo, nearly killed him, and all seemed to be falling into place as she left to bring Luke back to the fight. Then Kylo used the Force to get into her head. He was turning their greatest weapon against them, but they would hit him back where it hurt. Somewhere along the way, Kylo had developed feelings for her. It would be laughable if it wasn’t so nauseating. Regardless of how sick and twisted it was, Rey was the Supreme Leader’s weakness. If Kylo believed she betrayed him, it could lead him to do something… stupid. Poe would make sure he was there to use it to his advantage. He patted his jacket pocket that contained the vial and, he hoped, the advantage they needed.

With one hand on his blaster, he crouched as he rounded the building. He stopped short as he noticed a ship docked out front. It was late enough in the night cycle – or early enough in the day cycle, depending upon the perspective – that there shouldn’t have been anyone awake. There most definitely shouldn’t have been off-worlders visiting, especially at the Cloning facility, unless it was an inspection from the First Order. The ship was not a regulation First Order vessel, though. From the looks of it, Poe estimated that it likely belonged to a bounty hunter.

“What are you doing here?” he wondered aloud.

As if in answer, the door to the facility opened, and four cloaked figures slipped out into the night. He couldn’t discern much in the downpour, but from what he could see, none of them were Kaminoan. Keeping his eyes on the figures, he moved with the shadows along the building wall and slipped inside the open door. The one leading was drastically shorter than the rest, and he suspected that one was the bounty hunter, possibly Ubese or Rodian. By the gait of the others, they were likely human. They were much larger in stature than Poe, but not nearly tall enough to be Kaminoan. Perhaps they were stormtroopers.

They all boarded the ship without a word; the humans did not seem to be the common bounty he’d witnessed boarding those ships; there was no evidence to suggest they were anything but willing passengers. In seconds the ship was racing skyward, and Poe stood alone in the darkness.

Poe turned to find every light inside the facility off. Whoever the other visitors were, they had not
been expected, either. He followed the white, ribbed, cylindrical corridor that, in the darkness, seemed more like the throat of a monster than a building. The immense walls on either side of him contained no doors. They were lined with two rows of large, round lights that would have sufficiently illuminated the corridor had they been on.

The long, winding corridor led to a single blastdoor. He readied his weapon and activated the blastdoor panel. It was a turbo lift. There was no control panel for floor selections, but the turbo lift shot downward on its own. He was almost relieved when the lift finally reached the bottom and the doors opened. He stepped into the room, and his eyes widened as they trailed upward. It was more a city than a room, reaching several hundred meters above his head and farther back than he could see in the darkness.

The entire facility was composed of tree-like structures. The centers were composed of tall, cylindrical tubes that carried a glowing blue substance. The tubes were arranged in rows as far as he could see in every direction. Feeding off those tubes were levels of disks – six disks per platform arranged like petals surrounding the tubes – and there were dozens of platforms per tubes. On each disk were hundreds of pods that contained the clones.

Each pod was filled with the blue substance, the infant clones wiggling with life inside. Though it was overwhelming to see the massive operation in person, he had seen the schematics; he had expected those. He had expected the large dome in the center of the clone "city" containing the blue lifeforce that pumped into the tubes, which pumped into smaller tubes in the disks, which fed each individual pod.

What he hadn’t expected were the rows and rows of larger, hovering pods at the base of the tubes that contained the clones in other stages of development, from childhood up to adulthood. Each pod had small tubes leading from the clones to the machine, from the machines to larger community tubes, which fed into the large vertical tubes supporting the platforms. It reminded Poe of a network of blood vessels. It was organized, effective, and functional.

The intel had suggested the older clones were kept in barracks in a separate facility. They all shared the same life-support, so Poe believed he could destroy them without actually having to encounter them. Seeing them in person made them more human. These pods were open and behaved more like bunks; each clone clad fully in white slept with tubes in their veins, feeding them the blue liquid. There was low audio playing from holorecordings in each pod – First Order propaganda, Poe realized. They were likely sedated and would never wake again, but that wasn’t what bothered him the most. As Poe walked by the pods, he took a good look at their identical faces. He had been right, they were human. Did Kylo Ren believe that his choice in genetics would stop anyone from killing them?

“Sick bastard.”
Walking past the adult clones was uncomfortable, but walking past the child clones was stomach-churning. He lifted his eyes from the faces that were beginning to blur together, and his hand returned to the vial in his pocket, focusing his mind on the mission. It didn’t matter if the clones looked like children; they weren’t, not truly. These clones had accelerated growth due to gene-splicing DNA of other species. They were likely created days before and would be full-grown in less than a week. Their DNA had been altered to be obedient, to lose their free will, to behave like a machine. They were fed propaganda from the moment they were created.

No, the clones were not children, and he had to destroy them.

This was for the Resistance. He wouldn’t be taking innocent lives, he would be destroying the Supreme Leader’s army; it didn’t matter who or what they looked like. If Kylo Ren would create a virus to kill them all, then obviously he didn’t care about their lives, either. No one cared about their lives, because they were just clones. They were expendable, and this was just a mission.

In his agitation, he rounded a corner and knocked into a pod. It detached one of the tubes feeding the young clone, spraying the blue substance onto the floor. Poe cursed as he avoided the mess, glancing over his shoulder. The last thing he needed was interference from the Kaminoans. He was prepared to kill to finish this mission, but that didn’t mean he wanted to do it. He picked up his pace as he made his way between the rows to the large blue dome.

Without hesitation, he climbed the rungs up to the top of the dome, sliding off an access lid. For an operation that likely reached into the billions of credits, it was all too easy. Then again, the Kaminoans likely hadn’t considered this scenario when they created the vial as a fail-safe. And Kylo Ren clearly never considered that Rey would give up that vial. Their error in judgment would cost them. Poe slowly tipped the vial to allow the contents to drip into the churning blue liquid, delivering a death sentence to every clone attached to its support.

It was Kylo Ren’s fault. He was foolish to create it and more foolish to entrust it with his enemy—even more so to tell her what it was for. For all his psychopathic tendencies, Kylo wasn’t stupid. His trust in Rey was, however, an expensive miscalculation. The Blue Shadow Virus was highly contagious and deadly; the best part was that Poe or any other innocent was not at risk, because the virus was incomplete. It could only replicate with the clone’s specific DNA sequence. With this vial, Poe could kill every last being with that DNA without fear of it spreading.

It will kill every last being with that DNA.

With a gasp of realization, Poe righted the vial with only a few drops remaining and slipped it back into his pocket.
He smiled.

He could barely contain his excitement with his new plan as he stepped down the last rung of the dome. By all calculations, the clones would be infected within minutes. Within twenty-four hours, the first wave of clones – the youngest – would be dead. He had just set into motion the events that would culminate in the end of this forsaken war. Without an army, the First Order would fall.

Poe wondered if that was what it felt like to have the Force; this prophetic, all-knowing power to see how events would unfold before anyone else could. He had set up a line of dominoes; though the First Order would see his push of the first one, only Poe understood where the last one would fall. Only he could clearly see the path to the destruction of the First Order. In trusting Rey, Kylo Ren had unwittingly orchestrated his own fate.

Stepping down from the bottom rung, the last sound Poe expected to hear was a small voice.
“What are you doing?”

“What the hell?” Poe turned with a start to find a small child no more than five years old, if the child aged like a typical human. This was no typical human, however. The clone stared up at him with innocent eyes like a child, but he knew there was no innocence behind them. This was a weapon. His hand moved to his blaster, but he hesitated. He couldn’t kill it – not because it was a child, but because the mission would quickly be uncovered if one of the clones had suffered a blaster bolt to the head. If they possessed the antidote, which Poe knew was formed from the Reeska root from the planet Iego, then the older clones could likely be saved in time. They would discover what he did, but it had to be after the first wave had died, when it was too late to save any of them.

His eyes settled on the blue substance staining the clone’s plain, all-white attire. The clone was awake because he had disrupted its pod. There was a port in the clone’s arm where the tube had been disconnected. If he just reattached the tube, the clone would drift back to sleep and die with the others.

“Come on, kid,” he said, grabbing the clone by the arm and directing it back to the pod. He could pretend to be the caretaker to get it to do what he wanted, even if staring at its face made him nauseous. When Poe found the pod again, the blue substance had leaked from the tubes to create a small pool like Talz blood at the base. The audio had switched from propaganda in the harsh, male voice to a soothing, female voice.

“Remain in your pod,” the voice instructed. “To reattach your Life-Support, connect the blue Life-Support line into the red access port, rotating to the right until the line clicks into place. If you are
unable to reconnect, press the blue flashing button on your hoverpod and…”

Poe’s blood ran cold. “Did you press the blue button?” The clone cowered as Poe grasped its shoulders in his panic, shutting its eyes and wincing as if it feared injury. That was ridiculous; clones didn’t feel emotion—they were programmed not to. He had to remember that he was speaking to someone who cognitively was still a child. “Sorry, kid; don’t be scared,” he said, patting the clone as comfortingly as he could muster as he knelt to its level. “I’m not mad, but did you push the big, flashing blue button?”

The clone shook its head.

It should have been relieving, knowing they weren’t expecting any unwanted company, but that created another concern. “Why not?”

The clones’ DNA was altered to make them obedient; they lost the ability to have free will, so what reason could it have for not obeying a direct order?

“I didn’t want to,” the clone answered simply. If only the answer was that simple.

He looked into the clone’s eyes again. There was something there, something more than should be in a clone’s eyes. Passion. Conflict. Humanity. “You… didn’t want to?”

The clone stared down at its feet, stretching the end of one of its white sleeves. “No, I want to go with you.” Poe was not heartless. He realized he was asking the clone to willingly go to its death. The thought hurt as if it had been a real child, but he had to convince himself the clone was still a weapon, even if it was an anomaly.

“You can’t go with me,” he said hoarsely, the wrongness of what he had to do churning in his gut. “Time to get back in the pod where you belong.”

“I don’t want to. I don’t like the things they say. I’m not like them.”

Poe was taken aback by how childlike it was. The clone reminded him of Beebee-Ate, whom he swore was more human than droid. “What’s your name?”
The clone was quiet for a moment, contemplating. “Is DV-2187 a name?”

The huff of disbelief left Poe’s lips before he could think about controlling himself. “No, no it’s not.” He swore that Leia was out there in the Force somewhere, laughing at the ironic fate that had been created.

He knew what Leia would do. For all her strength and bravery, the woman had a heart made of the very essence of stars. The problem was, in war, sometimes love and hope weren’t what the galaxy needed to be saved. “What if I turn the holorecordings off, so you can sleep?” he offered. The clone nodded, its lip quivering as it stared at the tube emptying a steady stream of the blue substance onto the floor.

Poe stood, lifting the clone from under its small arms. With a gentleness he couldn’t explain, he laid it down in the pod. He found the power for the holorecording and silenced it. Kneeling again next to the pod, he sighed in aggravation. He couldn’t shoot it, couldn’t leave it wandering around, couldn’t force the tube back into its port without risking it drawing attention to the mission. He had to wait until he could reconnect the line without interference from the clone. The completion of the mission would have to be delayed while he waited for the Supreme Leader’s weapon to fall asleep.

Though…it was difficult to reconcile the being in the pod with a weapon as it stared up at him. Clones couldn’t feel fear, but he could see it in this clone’s eyes. There was an understanding in them, as if it knew what Poe planned to do to it once it fell asleep, it would never wake again. No one but Poe knew. Yet, when it spoke, its voice was laden with tears. “B…Before I… go to sleep, can you tell me a story?”

Poe didn’t know how, but with those words, he was certain it understood its fate. It didn’t scream for help or beg for leniency, it only asked for one small kindness before it died. There was a heavy pressure behind his ribs. He cleared his throat. “About what?”

“What’s out there?” the clone asked, pointing to the turbolift. “I never got to see it.”

“I can’t –”

“If you do,” the clone whispered, tears shimmering in the corners of its eyes. “I’ll show you where they keep the antidote.”
When Poe left the facility, the virus had infected every clone connected to the life-support, the spilled fluid had been cleaned, the antidote had been removed, and the Kaminoans were none the wiser. The mission was a success, but his mind was far away from the excitement of the impending battle.

His thoughts were centered on a young clone who had no idea of the war raging beyond the walls in which it was imprisoned, who knew it was going to die but didn’t know why, who didn’t want to be the weapon it was born to be and only wanted one beautiful memory before it died. Poe wondered if, one day, when the war was over and the Supreme Leader was dead, he would look back and believe he made the wrong decision. He doubted it. Everything he did was for the good of the Republic… the Resistance.

When Poe left the facility, he never looked back.
Chapter End Notes

Implied death

Clones are poisoned but death occurs at a later point
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Kylo paced in front of the holoprojector. This was a terrible idea, probably the worst idea he’d ever had, but he was running out of time. Hux’s mutiny was imminent and the Force Destiny nearing completion. The rest of the galaxy had no idea what was hiding in the darkness. It was Kylo’s destiny to stop it – he had to believe that – but to have a chance, he needed help. Kylo didn’t want to call this man – especially not this man – but he was the only one who could help. The only question was – would he help the former Ben Solo? This man might have helped him at the Jedi temple, but that was before he became the Supreme Leader. Kylo had to believe he would again.

“Well, well, well, look what the loth-cat dragged in,” a familiar voice from the holoprojector redirected his thoughts. “When I was told Ben Solo was on holocall for me, I couldn't believe it. I told him, 'Ben Solo wouldn't be calling me asking for any favors; Ben Solo told me himself that he's dead.' And yet... here you are. You've got guts, kid. I'll give you that.”

He knew the man would throw a few verbal punches. After what Kylo had done, he deserved it. As apprentice to Snoke... Sidious, he had learned to harden himself against the pain it caused. “I appreciate you taking the holocall. I didn't expect –”

“You didn't expect what? For me to keep my promise? I said anything, Ben –”

“Kylo Ren –”

“ – Except call you by that ridiculous name.” The man pointed at him in a way that was achingly reminiscent of his father. “Though I hear you've got a new one now, 'Supreme Leader.' Who knew that the stupid, lost kid I picked up after he burned down his –” he adjusted his cape suavely, “less sophisticated uncle’s Jedi temple would turn his back on his family and become the next Darth Vader? I never thought Han Solo's pride and joy would be the cause of his death. And yet –” He tilted back in his chair, feet crossed atop his desk, and opened his palms upward in a dramatic gesture, “here we are.”

Kylo grit his teeth to restrain his sharp tongue. “I was not his pride and joy.”

The man shifted his feet, so the chair swiveled side-to-side as his hands were clasped over his chest. It exuded an air of leisure and inconsequence. If only that were true. “I take that back; you're still the same stupid and lost kid,” he said with a laugh. When Kylo remained stoic, his smile faded. “What do you want now? Last time I helped you, I unknowingly left you with the creature
that turned you into this. If you think I'm going to help you further destroy the galaxy and yourself, you've got another thing coming.”

Kylo knew asking for help was a stupid idea. Why would he help him after the pain he caused? Still, he had to try. “I thought you promised 'anything.'”

“I promised Ben Solo anything, not the Supreme Leader Kylo Ren,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand, the chair spinning away from the projector. When he came into view again, the smile had returned. “I'll tell you what, let's play a sudden death round of Sabaac. I win, you visit Bespin – without your posse of marching asshats. You win, I'll help you with whatever you need.”

“Fine, but if you end up with an 'Idiot's Array,' I'll know you're a cheat. My father told me stories…” Kylo was grateful the man pulled a deck from his sleeve without addressing his reference to Han. He dealt them each two cards facedown, then lifted Kylo's cards to the holoprojector – a four of Staves, and a Master of Sabers. “Negative fifteen.”

“Eighteen,” Kylo answered.

The man began shuffling the cards again, keeping his eyes downcast as he spoke. “How are you, kid? You look terrible.”

Kylo couldn't remember the last time someone asked him how he was. He couldn’t remember the last time he considered it. Had there ever been an answer other than “barely holding it together?” He tapped the table to be dealt another card. “I'll be better if you help me.”

“Nice cape. I see you're still into the dark get-up. It looks like the one I –”

“Lando –”

“Lando?” he laughed, setting the cards down to unnecessarily draw out the game. Kylo squeezed his fists to restrain himself. “I knew you when you ran around buck naked. I think I earned more than Lando.”

Kylo bit back a petulant groan. “I was two.”
Lando’s smile only grew larger and more knowing. “I'll address you as 'Little Starfighter' for the remainder of this game, unless you address me as Ben did. You know, Ben…my nephew… Han Solo's son. I know he's still in there.” They both knew he was the only person in the galaxy who could demand such things from him.

“Please... Uncle... deal the card. I need help finding an ancient artifact; a rare one. It's important. And if you’re feeling generous, possibly your schematics for rapid-freezing chambers, specifically carbon.” Lando dealt him another card, holding it in front of the holoprojector. A two of Flasks. He had twenty but needed twenty-three.

What did Lando have? He could have plucked the numbers from Lando’s mind, or even found the card in the deck he needed if he concentrated enough, though across-the-galaxy manipulation was exhausting. He could have; the Force knew both Lando and his father were the biggest cheats in the galaxy, but Kylo didn't cheat. The young Ben Solo would have taken another card or traded the Master in hopes for the Idiot. Kylo chose to stand instead.

Lando traded one of his cards with another card from the deck. “Are you staying?” he asked, referring to the game. Kylo nodded. “Well?”

“Twenty.”

Lando looked back down at his cards and tapped them on the desk in thought. When his eyes returned, there was something almost... paternal about them. “Do I want to know what you're going to use this artifact for? Or that chamber?”

“...To...” Kylo could have lied—the last problem he needed was his uncle believing he was trying to undermine the successes of the First Order—but he knew Lando wouldn’t help him unless he admitted the truth. And his uncle always knew the truth. He sighed, finally giving life to what he had formerly refused to admit aloud. “To stop something terrible from happening—something far worse than me.”

Lando was quiet for a moment while he considered his answer. He looked up at Kylo, dropped his cards face down on the table and shrugged, “I bombed out.”

Kylo frowned. Something was off. Lando had always shown his hand at the end of a game, even when he lost, which was rare. “What was your –”
“I might know someone,” Lando interjected as he quickly reshuffled the cards, “a contact for a curator of ancient artifacts of the rare variety. I can get you in touch with her. I can also send over some schematics, recommendations for companies with the resources you need, but that's all I can do for you. I only ask for a favor in return.”

Kylo nodded once. “Anything.”

“You leave Bespin out of your galactic empire –”

“Done.”

Lando stretched his hands behind his head as he leaned back in his chair. “And...”

“And?” Kylo repeated, brows raised. His uncle seemed… reluctant, however. What could Lando want that Kylo had? Money? The man had more than one person needed. A ship? Even as Supreme Leader, he likely couldn’t get him the one he truly wanted. It had to be something of material value, because that was all Lando cared about.

“You promise to think about the offer I am about to make you,” he replied. His eyes told Kylo that it was something of significance…and something Kylo wouldn’t want to hear.

“Lando…” he warned.

A smile grew on the older man’s face. “Yes, Little Starfighter?”

Kylo’s jaw clenched so tightly that he was certain he would break something. The pain made his vision blur. “Fine, Uncle, what am I considering?”

“You come to Bespin; work for me,” Lando lifted his hand to silence Kylo's inevitable protest. “You hated all of this, Ben. The politics, the Jedi, the… other people. You wanted to be a pilot; I'll make you a pilot. I'll give you a freighter. You choose what you want to do, where you want to go, who you fly with. If you choose transport, you can choose the product or clientele. You're too smart to do nothing, but if you want to fly the galaxy, then just fly the galaxy – meet a nice woman, or man, or droid… or all three, if that's what you're into. I’ve got an interesting package arriving in a few days from Maz Kanata that I think you’ll want to see. Maybe it’s exactly what you need. If you've got terms, name them. You know this offer is overly generous, especially for me.”
Everything in him screamed to take that offer. No one had ever cared about what he wanted, let alone offered him that life. Seven years ago Ben Solo would have taken that offer. Kylo couldn't take the offer, of course, but it was nice to imagine all the same. If Rey happened to be his co-pilot in his fantasy, that meant nothing.

“Do some soul searching about what you're doing here, Ben, before you get yourself killed. Because you know that's how this ends, don't you? Don't make your mother outlive you, too.”

“She won't have to,” he murmured as his eyes pooled with residual sorrow. “She died yesterday.” Kylo read the question in his uncle's eyes.

Did you kill her?

He thought of his last moment with her. She had looked tired, but he'd had no idea she was dying. If only he'd listened to Rey, maybe…. He swallowed the emotion that bubbled in his throat, chewing the words that threatened to spill out. Noticing his struggle, Lando's face softened.

“Ben, I –” Before the man could finish his statement, the sound in the room seemed to disappear into a vacuum. The air changed. The signs were not nearly as strong as they once were, but he knew.

“Uncle, I'll have to call you back.”

“Of course, you will,” Lando said with a sad smile. There was something in his eyes that studied Kylo’s features as if he were memorizing them. Lando looked at him as if he were saying goodbye. The longer he considered it, the more he believed his uncle was right. It would, in all likelihood, be the last time he saw the old man. He glanced away. It would be easier to say goodbye that way.

“Hey, Ben...” Kylo looked up at the man who was once his uncle and father's good friend. “Don't let this be the last time I see you.” Lando leveled him with a pointed stare, but his eyes were shiny. Kylo didn't answer. He couldn't. Instead, he flicked his fingers to end the call.

Kylo stood slowly, his back to the room and, presumably, his bondmate. Pressing his palms to the smooth surface of his desk, he focused on building up strong barriers in his mind. There was nothing he had to say to her. With any luck, she would disappear without saying a word to him. He
couldn't even look at her; he had no doubt the pain that would be evident on his features, and he refused to let her see that weakness.

“Ben?”

“Not now,” he whispered; it was all he could do to not let the despair taint his voice. Kylo knew the first time he saw her after the war room would be… trying, but he hadn’t realized just how desperate he would be to escape from her. He didn’t have it in him to fight again, but he couldn’t pretend everything was all right, either.

“Who was that?” she asked after a moment of heavy silence. “I’ve seen him before in your memories.”

Why? Do you want to swear loyalty to him, too?

“Lando Calrissian.”

Kylo heard the soft thud of her boots on the floor as she stepped closer. The vibrations of his energy became more agitated as the gap between them closed. The material of his cloak felt too tight around his throat as he swallowed. When Rey spoke again, she was just behind his left shoulder. “Who is he to you?”

“He was one of my father's closest friends,” he said curtly as he ripped the cloak from his shoulders – the cloak he had given her but had been returned to him by Dameron. His skin was itchy and on fire. He had to distract himself with training or he would react… poorly…again. Without a glance in her direction, he moved across his chambers to put space between them.

Unfortunately, she followed him. “You called him ’Uncle.’”

“I called the Wookiee that, too, and he shot me.” With his back to her, he focused on unfastening the clasps of his tunic with his trembling hands as he tried to ignore her overwhelming energy.

“He loves you still, Ben. I can see how –”
“What do you want?” he snapped, turning to glare at her. Rey jolted back as if surprised by his reaction.

“I wanted to make sure you're okay,” she replied softly. The red-rimmed glossiness of her eyes was almost his undoing. But then he remembered what she did.

“Okay? Why wouldn't I be?” His focus returned to his tunic, and he finished releasing the clasps as he continued sarcastically, “I'm not the one whose 'family' was holding blasters to my head.”

Mine chose lightsabers.

She continued to argue with him—to what end, he didn’t care. “He changed the setting to stun.”

“I assumed, since you're not dead.” He ripped the tunic from his shoulders more impetuously than he intended and threw it away from him as if it was on fire. He had shed his top layers to his undershirt, suspenders, and arm guards. It would be enough to train.

Kylo pushed past her as she continued to prove the "loyalty" she swore to the Resistance. “He wants me to negotiate our surrender, but he’s planning an ambush,” she said.

“Tactically, it makes sense.” He moved down the private corridor that connected his quarters to the training room. It should have been enough to close the connection, but Rey followed closely on his heels.

“Is that all you have to say?” she demanded. He nearly laughed that – after what she had done – she believed she could demand anything from him. “Ben, talk to me!”

“I am.”

“No, this is all as false as your mask. Why won't you talk to me?” He wished he had thought to grab his mask. Then he could have turned to her and told her to leave. If he had the mask, she wouldn’t see what she did to him carved into his face like the scar.

“I need to focus on my training.”
“Ben?” He refused to look at her as he fiddled with a training droid, fixing the position of its lightsaber.

“Please go, Rey.”

“What’s wrong?” she demanded. He didn’t respond. Instead, he activated the droid and engaged his weapon. “Ben!” He ignored her and twisted the lightsaber in a quick flourish.

She approached him with determination. He could sense her; her presence altered his fighting stance as he actively avoided her. She stubbornly refused to yield, and he refused to acknowledge her, conceding several burns from the training weapon to avoid striking her. Eventually, he was forced to turn his back to her to separate her from the blade, something he wouldn’t have even trusted doing around his Knights.

She was undeterred.

“Ben!” She was hellbent on forcing him to respond to her. As she advanced toward him, she put herself between him and the droid. Mid-turn, he tried to deactivate the weapon before it hit her, but it managed to burn her right shoulder before it flickered out. A flash of a lightsaber slashing through the rain brought his mind back to the temple… and its consequences. She cried out as the blade of the training saber hit her from behind as well. He immediately deactivated the droid with a flick of his wrist as the understanding settled between them.

“Did that hurt you?!” he shouted fearfully.

In the beginning, a blaster bolt couldn’t reach across the galaxy, but their hands could. Once they touched hands, it changed everything. Objects could reach across the galaxy and stay, they could switch their surroundings between their worlds, they could access skills and memories, they could share dreams, they could use the Force to alter objects in the other’s world, they could use the Force on each other, and objects and people could interact with them; but all of this had been under their control. When they switched between worlds, it was because they wanted to. When they shared a dream, it was because they both found each other there. When they hit each other with objects, it was because they willed it.

She hadn’t interacted with the training droid as he had with the Juggalor or her friends, and Kylo certainly didn’t will his lightsaber to hit her. If they had control over the bond, it shouldn’t have hurt her. If it did, then the control was no longer theirs; they could fully interact with the other’s
world. “Rey, did that blade just hurt you?”

Her gaze was distant as the implication settled over her as well. “The bond is getting...”

“What were you thinking?” he shouted. It wasn’t rage tightening in his chest, however, but fear. “I could have killed you!”

“Stronger,” she finished. “The bond is getting stronger.”

“That’s not the way to test it!” he grabbed her by the left shoulder to force her to look at him. “Why would you do that, Rey?!” She winced from the pain of his grip on her still injured shoulder. He had forgotten the burn from the errant blaster bolt fire by her friend. He immediately recoiled, but she grabbed his arm before he could leave.

“I’m okay. Now we know, right?” Her voice and energy were calm, but he was a jumble of chaos as his fear provided him with the consequences of a bond no longer under their control. Rey persisted. “I wanted you to talk to me. What happened? Why are you ignoring me?” He ran his hand down his face, trying in vain to quiet his mind from analyzing the potential significance of their newest revelation.

“It’s nothing,” was all he could answer, his chest still surging in panic.

“‘Nothing' apparently means something different to you, so humor me,” she said, smiling softly. He swallowed the truth. His entire body was still stuck in panic mode over the implications of the bond. Tearing the scab from the deep emotional wound of the war room would be too overwhelming. His eyes quickly darted around the room, looking for an escape. “Ben...”

His mind reeling, he was barely present in the room with her. His words were sharper than he intended. “I have nothing to say to you.”

The softness of her face was short-lived. “You have nothing to be angry at me for!”

Like hell, I don’t! He breathed in the comfort of the darkness that accompanied the anger, pausing long enough not to scream at her.
“You’re right. I should have known the only reason you would show sentiment toward me was as a favor to my mother.” He may not have raised his voice, but his tone was cutting. This was how he protected himself from vulnerability and weakness. The darkness was his shield to protect him from emotional pain. He was safe as long as he wielded his words as weapons.

Rey opened her mouth in retort but paused as she processed his words. “What are you talking about?”

He didn’t want to do this. Didn’t she understand that his restraint had frayed to threads? His general was planning a mutiny, the Force Destiny could already be finished, he had just spoken to the uncle he hadn’t seen since he joined the First Order, their bond had grown beyond a strength either of them possessed, and now she wanted him to rehash the events of the war room. He refused to do it.

His mouth disagreed. “I heard what you said to the pilot.”

“What did you hear?” She tried to conceal the trepidation in her voice. And failed. He could see the guilt written plainly on her face.

“Enough,” he said. Everything.

Neither spoke as they glared at each other. He watched the realization settle in stages across her face. First fear, then suspicion, then anger.

“Why didn’t you say anything? Why were you listening to a private Resistance conservation?” It was packaged like a demand, but he heard the split-second of hesitation in her voice. She wasn’t truly angry, not about this.

“Don’t,” he warned, stepping toward her as he lowered his voice to a growl. “Don’t pretend that conversation was about Resistance strategy. Don’t try to turn this around on me. You think I didn’t already know any of your true opinions of me? Though it was enlightening to hear it all from you, I wasn’t there to spy on you. I woke up, and you were gone. I felt your panic. I felt your pain. You wouldn’t answer, and I was powerless to help you. I thought...”

He stopped himself before his voice cracked. Clenching his fists, he swallowed the emotions bubbling to the surface. He had to redirect the argument to safe territory. “But don’t worry, you made it clear. Any kindness you have shown me was purely for the benefit of my mother; every
word you've said to me is out of obligation to the mission to turn me. And your confession...was merely following orders. When you chose the Resistance over me...again. I should have ended the war right there, but I didn't want to stick around for another kiss and oath of loyalty to an anarchist.”

Rey cried out in frustration. She shoved him backward and pointed a finger at him accusingly. “First, he has a name; it's Poe. Use it. Second, I kissed him to protect both of us! You're right, I was following orders. His! I didn't have a choice! And third, I lied when I said those things about your mother to him. What did you want me to do, tell him the truth about us? Like you told your general the truth about the throne room?”

_Lies._

Rey must have sensed his distrust or heard his thought, because she continued as if he had said the word aloud. “Your mother didn't know about our bond until minutes before I brought you to her! There was no mission. If you don't believe me, then why don't you just do what Snoke did to find the information you need, since you're obviously hellbent on being just like him?! For the love of the Force, you're infuriating!” When she finished, her chest was heaving in outrage. Perhaps it was the heavy puffs of her breath or the strength with which she had pushed him or the something inside him calling him to believe her, but he felt the sudden urge to kiss her. He swallowed it. Stepping away from her before he did something foolish, he fought to close himself off from her. But she had noticed his change in demeanor and crossed the distance between them.

“Ben,” she whispered his name softly in that way of hers that made him crave to kneel at her feet. “If you think I'm lying, about any of it, let me in. I'll show you. The truth is in the bond; you taught me that.”

Kylo couldn't explain why, but he didn't _want_ to know the truth. He didn't know what would be worse: the confirmation that it had all been a lie or proof that what she confessed was the truth. “I've seen enough,” he answered.

“Search my mind. I want you to. You'll see —”

It would tear him apart if he knew. “No,” he said resolutely. Her eyes immediately burned in anger.

“Then you'll believe lies!”
“I don't care!”

His admission surprised them both. “You're afraid,’’ she realized. “You would rather believe the lies, because you’re afraid of the truth.”

Kylo was sick of lies, sick of the truth. He was sick of the seeds she planted in his mind that uprooted everything else. If he stopped answering and turned his back to her, eventually she would have to leave.

Rey stepped even closer. “You want to believe that your mother ordered me to pretend to care for you as a mission, that I was trying to lure you into a trap to turn you. You want to believe that I wanted to kiss Poe and that I don't love you. It would be easier to keep doing the evil things you do if all those lies are true, if I was your enemy and Ben Solo was dead. Keep lying to yourself, Supreme Leader, but don't expect me to pretend with you. I've spent enough of my life pretending.”

So have I. He refused to give voice to the words. Please go.

“That's why I don't know where I belong anymore. I'll never find my place with the First Order, but I can't pretend any longer that my place is with people who ally with the Hutts. If I left the Resistance,” she said softly, and he could almost imagine the tears in her eyes. “Would you go with me?”

Kylo didn't answer. He couldn't trust himself to answer. Remaining still, in the hope she would leave, he kept his back to her. Her retreating footfalls echoed through the training room until they stopped abruptly at the far edge, a heavy silence enveloping them. He would have believed the Force had transported her back across the galaxy had he not been able to feel her. When he was in her presence, she consumed his every sense and thought; every nerve ending was attuned to her. She was staring at him; he knew it without searching the Force.

“You can hate me if you want; I don't blame you, okay? Even if it wasn't the truth, I know I hurt you. I'll leave if you answer one question – why? After everything he did, why did you save Poe?”

This time Kylo didn’t have an answer. It had been an instinctive reaction. He had felt the warning; he knew what was about to happen, and he couldn’t allow it. Maybe it was for Rey. Maybe it was out of guilt. He wouldn’t make that mistake again. “Fine, don't talk,” she continued, “just listen. I don't know why you did it, but I do know this – that wasn't Kylo Ren saving him, it was Ben Solo. Underneath it all, you're a good man, Ben. You know it just like you know this was not a mission. You're the one I want, but what do you want?”
He wanted her to hate him. It was easier to weather her anger than have hope that she could ever want someone like him. He knew she didn’t love him, but she made him want things he couldn’t have. It terrified him. “After I thought Dameron killed you, I destroyed my quarters to destroy the memory of you there. When I realized you were alive, I went to the bridge to destroy the Resistance,” he told her, closing his eyes to prepare for the inevitable fight that he was intentionally trying to provoke. “I didn’t, but I wanted to do it. I wanted to make them suffer. I’m not a good man, Rey. If you knew what was best for you, you would shut this bond out for good.”

Her voice was much closer than he had anticipated when she spoke again. “You didn’t do it.”

“That may be, but it was for selfish reasons. I gave them another location instead. Nal Hutta will be destroyed. There is a flotilla en route. Do with that information what you will.” He had given her the chance to save lives. To save… the Hutts. Would it be better for the galaxy if the Hutts were no longer in existence? Could she stand by and allow an entire civilization to be destroyed? He left their fate in her hands and had no doubt what she would do with the information.

Her hand grasped his arm, and he turned like a fool. Her touch burned his skin long after he’d turned. “You are a good man, Ben Solo.”

It was reflexive. “Ben Solo is already…”

“Just… stop it. Ben Solo is not dead. If you’re Kylo Ren, then why are you here with your enemy? Why haven’t you killed me as you’ve sworn to do? Destroying the Jedi Order is all Kylo Ren ever wanted! If you’re Kylo Ren, if Ben Solo is truly lost, then kill me now. Your mission will finally be complete,” she dared. The woman truly had no fear of him.

“You know I won’t.” He nearly smiled at her ferocity. He imagined her a porcupine—all sharp claws and poisonous quills. But he appreciated that about her. He wondered if that made him another porcupine… or a gundark.

“That’s what I thought,” she said, crossing her arms as she stared him down. “You're Ben Solo.”

“I'm not.”

She stepped closer, but her eyes were alight with something other than anger. Kylo had no idea how to fight like this. “What am I supposed to call you? Kylo Ren? Supreme Leader?”
“Your highness?”

“What is so terrible about Kylo Ren?” he murmured. “It is my name.”

“It’s a made-up name.”

He shook his head but stopped abruptly as she moved even closer. Should he back away? Was she trying to intimidate him into agreeing with her? If she was, it wouldn’t work. “Solo is a made-up name. It was made up for my father when he joined the military. And my mother's last name wasn't originally Organa, it was Skywalker. Organa was her adopted name. Rey might not even be your real name. How is this any different?”

“What about 'Ben?’” she asked, ignoring his counter-question. “That name is yours.”

“It's not my name. It's the name of the man who betrayed my grandfather and almost killed him. Why would I want that legacy? And Ben was a made-up name too. His real name was Obi-wan. Kylo Ren is not a Skywalker or Solo or Organa or Kenobi.” Kylo found it difficult to argue with someone who stared at him like that. Her hand was still on his arm, and it was setting his body on fire. What did she want? “He’s…” he could barely remember what they were arguing about, “he's no one. Just me.”

Her hand slid up his arm incrementally. “Can you even honestly tell me that you made up the name?”

“I earned that name;” he rasped. His mind was screaming to run before he admitted something foolish.

“You would rather keep the name given to you by Snoke than the one given to you by your father? Her hand continued its ascent, but he grabbed it with his opposite hand to stall her efforts. He leaned down to stare in her eyes.

“You want to call me Ben, hold onto the past, fine. But I draw the line at Ben Solo.”

“But you cannot deny who you are, Ben.” You cannot deny the truth that is your family. The night on Jakku flashed through his mind. He shut his eyes, but the words were no less truthful, the images no less vivid behind his eyelids. He tried to control his visceral reaction, but he knew she
could see the shudder that rolled through him. “You don’t want to be Kylo Ren, but you’re afraid to be Ben Solo,” she realized. “This is about your father, isn’t it?”

With his eyes closed, it was easier to be vulnerable. “What does it matter, Rey?”

“But you care so much about honesty and truth, but you hide the greatest truth of all.” She said it as if it was the easiest truth to see. She said it as if he could concentrate on her words as her fist turned in his hand – evidently, he was still holding onto her – and she laced her fingers in his. She said it as if he had the emotional fortitude to weather this conversation. “You... are... Ben... Solo.”

It wasn’t the words she said—he’d heard them before—it was her conviction. The Force was screaming in his mind. Kylo couldn’t take it anymore. He opened his eyes and shouted, “I don’t deserve that name!”

“Whether you feel you deserve it or not doesn’t make you any less of a Solo.” It was something his mother would say. It would typically create an aggressive response, but he was weary. Other battles had to be won, and, clearly, it was a battle he had to fight alone. She had sworn loyalty to the people who would kill them both. He knew the truth. To stop Force Destiny, he needed to be Kylo Ren, not Ben Solo.

He sighed. “Whether Ben Solo died that night at the temple or he dies as Kylo Ren, does it truly matter?”

“It does to me,” Rey said, tightening her grip on his hand.

Kylo delicately pried her hand from his. I can’t do this with you, Rey, not tonight. That wasn’t what he told her, however. “I gave you what you wanted. Please, leave.” It didn’t come out as he intended—his thoughts rarely did—but as she backed away from him, sorrow in her eyes, he knew he had to let her go. He stared at the floor so he wouldn’t have to see the disappointment in her eyes.

The echo of her fading steps was evidence enough that she had acquiesced to his plea, but he still flinched when the bond snapped shut.
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Kylo had heard tales of the information-storing holographic recording device long before he had fallen to the dark side. More legend than anything else, he had heard stories of the device that held five thousand years of knowledge from the Sith Empire. He had spent many a night with Jacen and... others, studying ancient texts for clues to its whereabouts. The pursuit to find it had called to him. At the time, he had believed it was calling to more than just his darkness.
After all, if a Jedi were to find it... perhaps that particular Jedi could have proved himself worthy to his family. That Jedi could have made a name for himself, could have been remembered for doing something good for the galaxy, could have broken away from the shadows of legends. Perhaps that Jedi wouldn't have been viewed as a monster anymore. But those were the fantasies of a weak little boy. The pursuit of the holocron had called to him because he was the grandson of Darth Vader.

As the darkness within him grew, however, his desire waned to find the best-kept secret in the galaxy. His master had originally been a creature interested in his strengths in both the darkness and the light. The teachings of the Sith were “incomplete,” according to “Snoke.” And Kylo tended to agree. The Jedi Order failed him because it forced him to forsake the darkness within him—to deny a part of himself. He had no desire to suffer that conflict again.

His master was no Sith; there had been no Sith in over thirty standard years, since the fall of the Empire. The Sith died with Darth Vader. Or at least he’d thought they had. But then he discovered Snoke was Sidious. Perhaps the Sith and their beliefs were not as far gone as everyone had believed; perhaps Sidious had been stoking the same conflict in him that Luke had been all along. He had just been too blind to see it. But even if he allowed his hatred and fear to drive him—an admittedly Sith concept—he had meant what he said in the throne room. He desired to see an end to both the Jedi and the Sith.

The entirety of his time spent with the First Order was driven more by the desire to destroy the Jedi, rather than subscribing to any particular dogma. It had always been revenge against Luke that had aligned his loyalty with Snoke, or in actuality, Sidious. In Sidious's absence, he realized that the whispers in his head still influenced his beliefs, but the causes he thought himself loyal to no longer held his resolve. He found himself drifting further from the ideologies of the First Order or the dark side.

Especially as Supreme Leader, he had never had an interest in finding the thousand-year-old doctrine of a dead religion. That is, until Hux revealed *Force Destiny*. If *Force Destiny*, a Sith invention, could restore life to his former master, then the Telos Holocron could be the only device in the galaxy with the knowledge to rival such a weapon.

There was the book *Science of Creating Life*, but he couldn't come within star systems of Rey without risking her life from both the Resistance and the First Order. They could pass it over the bond, but after the incident in the war room, it would be foolish of her to risk being caught providing the Supreme Leader with significant intel. Even if she would do it, even if they could ensure she wasn’t caught, Kylo refused to ask her. That would not doubt require him to talk to her and every interaction he had with her threatened to destroy his resolve. He couldn’t lose focus. The Telos Holocron was his only hope.
That was how he found himself contacting Lando Calrissian, a man with unlimited connections, after he had learned of the new weapon. It was a struggle, speaking with his father's close friend after what he did. He was too much of a coward to do it again, lest he accept the man's offer.

That was why he had contacted Bazine, the First Order's highest-paid resident mercenary, to handle it for him. He had directed Hux to task her with summoning the Knights of Ren, as even he – or perhaps especially he – had not been made aware of their mission locations. Kylo needed a reason to maintain regular communication with her that Hux would suspect—because Hux always suspected—but would focus him on the wrong threat. He let Hux concern himself with the arrival of the Knights, and Kylo had the opportunity to obtain the information for the one object capable of exposing the core vulnerability of the Order's newest superweapon.

It had been his intention to hide the truth under Hux's nose, and, so far, the plan had been a success. He had received the name of the contact from Lando through Bazine and then narrowed down her location to a crime syndicate, based on tips from her numerous connections—and Hux had been none the wiser.

Bazine knew the underworld markets of the galaxy better than anyone else. He long suspected that whatever temple the holocron had been hidden away in had been destroyed ages ago. There were few secrets left in the galaxy, especially such lucrative ones, so a crime syndicate was no surprise. He had no doubt: if the contact existed, Bazine would find her. And with the limitless wealth and power of the First Order, he would make the owner an offer they couldn't refuse.

That was how he found himself in the conference room attached to his personal chambers, awaiting the "curator" of the holocron. If it had been his mother's meeting, he knew she would have made them wait for her. She was always in control, letting the other person grow uncomfortable in her absence, always beginning the meeting on her terms. But this was just another difference between them. Kylo preferred to be the first in the room.

His control was not over the timing of the meeting but monitoring the threat as the other person entered. He had been ambushed with punishment by his former master one too many times to ever be the last one in a room again. Not that he had any interest in power games with this curator. She had something that he wanted, and he would pay handsomely to have it. It was as simple as that. He only hoped she—or her client—were not prepared to play unnecessary games with him.

When the curator was led into the room, he was thankful for his mask so he wasn't forced to school his expression. An intimidating human woman stood before him. Silver laced through her dark brown hair, which was tied back simply from her face. There were no intricate Alderaanian braids as Kylo had grown accustomed to with his mother; no, this woman reminded him more of Rey. She was well put together, but it was clear she did not share his mother's royal upbringing—walking like a fighter rather than a princess. She was definitely not what he had been expecting.
There was something about her that intrigued him. It wasn't an attraction in the physical sense. Certainly, she was beautiful in her older age. But Kylo compared every woman he met to Rey, and there was no competition. No, this was something else. It was a warm whisper in the Force. A vicarious familiarity, as if a soul he had once known deeply had long ago danced with hers, forever leaving an imprint. He recognized something in her—her smile, perhaps—that he remembered from a dream long ago. Or perhaps someone else's.

She was not the usual woman he met through the First Order, and for that he was grateful. Most seemed to fall into one of two categories: terrified of the monster or attracted by his power. He had long grown accustomed to the first group. He loathed the second. There was no doubt what the women who had thrown themselves at him had wanted; he was a hideous, unlovable monster, after all. They only desired wealth, power, or fame. It disgusted him what they offered him for a taste of it. His former master had encouraged them – if only because he knew how Kylo was revolted by it – but it had only grown worse in the few instances he had been subjected to them as Supreme Leader.

It was just another reason why he loathed in-person negotiations with planetary leaders. He knew it would be worse as Supreme Leader, and he’d tolerated the suggestive words until the incident on Mon Cala. A female Quarren's tentacle had suggestively touched the bare skin of Kylo's neck during a diplomacy meeting in an attempt to seduce him. Kylo had ended those deliberations by cutting off her tentacle with his lightsaber. Needless to say, the negotiations had not ended amicably. It had only been his third negotiation as Supreme Leader and he refused to participate in another. That was why Hux currently handled most peaceful on-world negotiations.

Hux didn't mind handling the women who threw themselves at him in those negotiations. Perhaps he enjoyed the flattery, or perhaps he ignored them because he preferred those of the male persuasion. Either way, Kylo was grateful. He wouldn't allow anyone close enough for that nonsense, except for Rey. He fell apart under her touch and he still didn’t know what she wanted from him. Despite her inadequate upbringing, he had learned painfully that Rey was not interested in any of the power or wealth. Perhaps it was part of what had drawn him to her in those early connections, beyond his interest in her past. Rey was neither terrified of him nor drawn to his power.

To his relief, the woman who presently sat across from him showed no interest in seducing him either. But they both knew she had something far greater than a warm body to offer him. She was not terrified of him; on the contrary, she projected a self-assured energy that he respected. He knew that if he ignited his lightsaber and pointed it at the woman's throat, she would not bat an eye in fear. It was clear she was accustomed to working in the presence of dangerous men and valued her life too little to fear for it. There was a strength and determination about her that reminded him of his mother and a rogue toughness to her like his father. The galaxy had made her a fighter. Still, behind the jaded emptiness in her eyes, there was something warm and kind.
“Supreme Leader Kylo Ren, I presume,” she said after allowing him a moment to quietly study her. Though she was first to break the silence, she did not glance away from his visor, as if she could sense his piercing stare. He stood, remembering himself, and gestured to the seat across from him. When he did not extend a hand in introduction, she nodded and took her seat. He stood for a moment, considering her, before retaking his seat. His behavior tended to make others wary of him, but not her. “Can I ask you to remove the mask so I can see with whom I am speaking?” It was a bold request, but he complied to win her favor. Pressing the release on the helmet, he set it down beside him on the table. It left him at a disadvantage, but he lowered his voice to better conceal his emotions.

“I presume you have the holocron?”

“Straight to business,” she said with a smile. “Very well. Before I disclose its location, let us discuss terms.”

“Name them,” he said simply. “But I am not leaving this room without that device.” He leaned back in his chair in a relaxed position, opening his gloved palms invitingly as his uncle had done when they played cards. If only he felt as confident as his uncle was. His only hope was she would sense his sincerity. He had meant it; money was no object. He had not summoned her to play games.

She folded her own gloved hands together carefully and cleared her throat. It was the first nervous behavior that he had observed in her, and he cocked his head as he scrutinized the twitches of emotions passing over her face. It was enough to break some, but not her. “My client's offer is non-negotiable, I'm afraid, Supreme Leader. Five billion credits upfront. Unfortunately, it is the only one of its kind in the...”

“Done.”

“I wasn't finished,” she retorted, not unkindly. He was taken aback by her effrontery, but he allowed her to continue. He had no desire to challenge her in a battle of wits; he had learned his lesson with Rey, and this woman possessed something he needed desperately. He held the true power; they both knew it. Or so he convinced himself. “My client requires five billion credits. I, however, am not interested in your wealth.”

He leaned forward in curiosity. “And what is it that you are interested in, madam...?”

“Your time,” she interjected. Clearly, she was also not interested in providing him her name. Not that he would have questioned her if she had provided him a false one. He could see it in her eyes:
she was not someone worth such anonymity. No, but she knew what she was doing and was finding her own way to maintain control around one of the most powerful men in the galaxy. He momentarily considered searching her mind for the name, but after brushing against her mental barriers, he thought better of it. She was not a Force-sensitive, but she had clearly been trained by those who were.

“My time?”

She nodded, never breaking eye contact. “An hour, to be precise. You interest me.”

His lips curled into a sneer as his brows knitted instantly. He leaned forward even farther, his voice dropping several octaves, sharpening in contempt. “I... am not... for purchase.”

She smiled at his offense, maintaining her confident demeanor. “You misunderstand my intentions,” she said coolly. “I am well aware that a man such as yourself can... gain carnal knowledge of any woman he wishes in the galaxy...” He hadn’t intended for his thoughts to stray to Rey or his deep yearning for her, but he knew the woman observed it in his eyes as she spoke. “Or perhaps it is one particular woman who has drawn your attention?” He tried to temper the horror that passed across his face that would reveal his greatest weakness. She smiled knowingly.

“No matter, your secret is safe with me. That is the business I deal in, after all. Without carefully maintained discretion, I would not attract my most private clientele. I am merely curious about the enigmatic, force-powerful young man who appeared from nowhere and became the leader of the known galaxy. He wishes to spend five billion credits for the wisdom of a dead religion, when he is already rumored to possess inside himself more power than any man could ever desire. So, what is it that does interest him? I wish for an hour of your time only to satisfy my curiosities. I will not ask you to reveal secrets of the First Order or divulgements you would otherwise consider treasonous. What I learn will be for my ears only. My only stipulation is that you answer all my questions. Honestly.”

Sure. When Geonosis freezes over.

“No.”

“Those are my terms, Supreme Leader,” she said boldly. “Though your refusal only further piques my interest. You would spend the credits—worth more than entire civilizations—for this holocron, but it is not worth revealing your secrets to the woman whose business is in secrets? Very well,” she stood gracefully, but he swiftly caught her wrist.
“Let me see it,” he demanded, a rasping desperation in his tone.

“Five billion credits upfront and one hour of your time. Those are the terms.” He hated her ability to maintain composure in a way he never could. Her tone never changed, her body language displaying only calm confidence. *This is no bluff.* If he refused, he had no doubt she would leave that destroyer without securing the obscene amount of credits she had come for.

“I need to verify its authenticity before I transfer anything,” he argued, releasing her wrist.

“With all due respect, let me make something very clear for you,” she smiled, though her eyes did not. “Your sanctions in Kessel and Felucia have thoroughly inconvenienced my client, and he does not take kindly to being accused of what you are dangerously close to accusing him. This transaction is merely a courtesy to your cause as a favor to an old friend, as the price we have negotiated is trivial in comparison to the amounts my client has invested in your military. Though I am curious as to whom you believe provides funding for all of this,” she said, gesturing casually to the room around them.

“You are the leader of the known galaxy, Supreme Leader, but even you must know that the wealth of the galaxy lies with the men in the shadows who fund this organization of yours. And in wealth lies the true power. Once the credits have been transferred, I will provide you with the secure location of the artifact.” She opened a holo in her hand, projecting the image of the legendary crimson crystal.

Kylo wanted nothing more than to tell her where she could shove her artifact, influential clientele, and insolent comments. However... *I don't have a choice.* Losing the holocron was not an option. He risked humiliation, betrayal, and possible fraud if he agreed to her terms. He risked the unopposed return of Snoke—no, of *Sidious*—if he didn't. There was no decision to be made. He may have been the Supreme Leader of the galaxy, but he was beginning to learn that he was not the one in control.

Working his jaw in resentment, he passed a datapad across the black stone surface of the conference table. “Enter the account information.”

“What of the other terms?” she asked, eying him over the spectacles she had secured on her nose.

“Nothing concerning the First Order – which includes my desire for this holocron – you have one hour, and you will surrender all electronic and transmission devices,” he said quietly, attempting to
control the dejection in his voice. Who was he kidding; he couldn't even control his expressions.

She returned the datapad across the table with another smile. As he finished the transaction, she retrieved a map from the holo and slid it to him. “These are the coordinates to your holocron.”

“What do you mean? You don't have it with you?”

“I'm curious; did you expect me to carry a five-billion credit crystal onto a destroyer filled with tens of thousands of military personal under your orders?” Her eyes were alight with humor. “Not that you would need them. I have heard tales of your extensive powers in the Force. Despite your assurances, my client required a certain level of... precaution. The artifact has been secured at an abandoned fortress on an uninhabited planet located at those precise coordinates. You will have your holocron in...” she studied the chrono on her wrist, “...just over an hour.”

Kylo hummed, summoning an officer on his comlink to transfer the coordinates to the bridge. Hux would likely be irritated by the detour – when was he not irritated – but the coordinates were within range of the current course. If Hux still took issue with the delay, Kylo would deal with it later. After all, it didn’t truly matter when they arrived on Barkhesh. The Resistance would be long gone.

“Fine. You have your credits, now surrender your electronic devices.” She removed her comlink, chrono, spectacles, and rings in an attempt to placate him. He could sense that she was not hiding anything under her conservative black and tan dress. The officer who entered the room seemed to sense Kylo's vexation or had heard enough rumors of his temper. She wordlessly accepted the coordinates from the Supreme Leader, her eyes downcast obsequiously through their short interaction. As the door shut behind the officer, Kylo sighed. “Let's get this over with.”

His eyes met hers across the table, anxiety tightening every muscle in his body, instinctively preparing himself for battle. He would have preferred a fight. Combat was second nature, pure muscle memory. The wounds would heal, his vulnerabilities were protected by a lightsaber, and the principle was simple—kill or be killed. The unknowns that this woman wanted were far more terrifying. “Do you have anything to drink, Supreme Leader?”

Her first question had already caught him off guard. “Of course...Water? Tea? Caf? I'll have a trooper fetch you something from the...”

“I am craving something a bit stronger,” she answered suggestively, another smirk playing on her lips. “Something from your private collection, perhaps?” He studied her with unfettered suspicion.
What is she playing at?

“I fear you will be disappointed by my limited collection,” he said slowly, studying her with careful scrutiny. Intentions in battle were clear. Hers were not. He had a difficult enough time understanding Rey, and he could read her thoughts. “I am certain the First Order's collection would more than satisfy your tastes...”

“I am not interested in the First Order's collection,” her tone was polite despite her bold assertion, “only yours.”

Why? What does she want from me? Is this an attempt at foul play? It must be. But the more time she spends drinking, the less I have to answer her, and then I'll have the holocron. Or her head.

He stood abruptly. “Follow me.”

He did not wait to see if she was indeed following him as he opened a secondary door that led to his chambers with a flick of his wrist. With determined strides, he shut the thought of her intrusion into his private rooms from his mind. He was thankful she could not see into his inner chambers to bear witness to the destruction. Pushing the thoughts from his mind as he had often done around his master, he focused on opening the compartment behind his desk.

“Corellian Whiskey?” he offered, removing the only carafe in the compartment. Her reaction was not what he was expecting. The truth was, Corellian Whiskey was preferred by no one in the galaxy. Except for his father, perhaps. But as he handed her the carafe, her eyes brightened as if she had seen an old friend.

She hummed. “I haven't been able to find this outside of my homeworld,” she smiled knowingly. “Pray tell, Supreme Leader, are you from Corellia?”

“No,” he answered shortly, but she continued to stare at him expectantly, so he added, “but my father is...was.” He cursed his own existence for being the reason he had to say “was.”

Ben! His father's voice echoed in his mind across the skyway that separated them. A flash of a memory tormented his dark heart. He relived the shock in his father's eyes as a crimson light illuminated the older man's forgiving face. He wasn't lying to Rey when he admitted he would gladly give up his own life to take that moment back.
“I’m sorry,” she whispered, “for your loss.” It was the first change in her demeanor since she had entered the conference room. The bold, confident woman gave way to someone much more solemn and burdened. Her eyes glistened with tears. No, they glistened with pity.

He loathed pity.

Without removing his gloves, he poured a liberal amount of the liquid poison into a tumbler and handed it to her, his fingers lingering on the glass until her eyes met his. “Why? I was the one who killed him.”

He expected a fierce reaction to his admission—fear, hatred, disgust—he deserved it. But his words elicited more pity. Or even... understanding. As if she knew what it was like, as if she had any idea why he had done the unthinkable.

No one could ever understand why he did it. He had the excuses he had fed himself, but in the deepest parts of his soul he still didn't know why he had made that choice. He knew his father could have walked away and destroyed Starkiller as planned. He didn't have to follow Kylo out onto the skyway.

Of course, Kylo had sensed him in the Force; he had chosen to walk the opposite direction to avoid that very confrontation. His father must have known what he was risking by walking out there in the open. But that was Han Solo, wasn't it? Not thinking... just doing. Without a plan, he was known for running toward the trouble, convinced he could talk or blast his way out of anything. How could this woman understand what it was like to have his father beg him to come home with him, ask him to abandon the dark side as if it was nothing? No one could ever understand the prison of darkness as he did.

But his father had been foolish enough to try anyway. They both knew he couldn't go back. His father had backed him into a corner, left him no choice. Or at least he had believed that there was no choice. But he couldn't take it back. His father was dead, no matter what decisions he wished he had made. She would never understand that. Or what it was like to ignite that lightsaber into his own father's heart. To feel relief that he was strong enough to do it, peace that it was finally over, and then, as his father fell away, the true nightmare became his existence. The despair and regret devoured him alive. He knew he would never be free of that pain. What could she know of the eternal suffering he had caused?

Nothing.
Her voice interrupted his thoughts. “My client is concerned about the strength of your military after the loss of Starkiller.” There was something in her eyes, however, that seemed knowing, as if she read the thoughts that had stolen his attention.

“There is no need for Starkiller. It is my duty to create order, which would be difficult to do if everyone was dead.” Kylo extended his arm in the direction of the conference room. His invitation was refused, however, when she remained standing next to his desk. “Nothing else about the First Order.”

She nodded in acquiescence. “What about the Resistance?”

“What about them?” he asked, his voice tight.

She studied him, watching for a reaction, and it agitated him that he didn’t know exactly what she knew. “Are you concerned about the rebellion they are forming?”

“No.”

She raised her eyebrow skeptically as she took a sip from her glass. “Not even now that they have the support of the Hutt cartel?”

“No,” he said evenly, hoping he disguised his surprise well. How had she known about their alliance? Would this knowledge interfere with the orders he had given? “They are desperate. We have solid control over the Core Worlds, so they need strongholds in the Outer Rim. I wouldn’t trust their support; the Hutts are loyal to no one but the Hutts.”

“I agree,” she said with a disarming smile. “What will you do with the Resistance when you find them?”

Kylo tilted his head slightly, studying her. He’d had enough of that line of questioning and intended to turn the conversation to his liking. “What do you think I should do with them?”

Her smile widened. “This isn’t about what I think, is it?”
“It’s not about my military strategies, either,” he retorted, voice low.

“I suppose not.”

“You didn’t come here to talk about my military,” he said. He had grown tired of the games and wanted her to lay her cards on the table. “Ask whatever it is you’re here to ask.”

The woman seemed preoccupied with her thoughts, studying her glass in pensive silence. “Will you drink with me, Supreme Leader?”

He shook his head. “I do not imbibe. Another preference you can thank my father for.” It was true. He had been more reckless when he was younger at the Jedi Academy, with the safety of Jacen and... him by his side, chasing away his loneliness and abandonment with the very drink that had caused conflict between his parents. But that had been a different lifetime. Once he had joined the First Order, where he was surrounded by enemies disguised as allies, he could trust no one enough to lower his defenses for even a moment. Any drug weakened his connection to the Force, and he refused to be caught unawares again.

“One drink, and I won't ask you about the circumstances of your father's death.” He knew he could not feign impassivity toward his father's death for long. If she started digging deeper into the single deed that split his soul in two, she would find his conflict…and in that conflict, weakness. It could lead her to Rey. That was a secret he would die to protect.

*I need the holocron,* he reminded himself.

He let out a long-suffering breath and eyed her sharply. “One drink.”

Removing another tumbler from the cabinet, he poured a respectable amount of the golden amber whiskey into his own glass with great reluctance. He raised the tumbler to hers in a bitter salutation. “What should we drink to?”

“Well, someone I knew a lifetime ago said something that always stuck with me,” she reminisced fondly. “He said 'let's drink two...’”

“...and see where it goes,” Kylo finished for her reflexively. It wasn’t until the words left his mouth that he remembered who he had learned it from. “Where did you hear that?” He studied her eyes
as they hesitantly met his, but the grim understanding was already clenching behind his ribs.

“From a boy I knew growing up on the streets of Corellia.” The glass in his hand cracked under his grip; his lungs were abruptly unable to inhale enough oxygen.

“What was his name?” he demanded. She held his piercing gaze but slowly sipped her drink instead. “His name!”

Her eyes were deep with sorrow. “You know his name.”

“Han Solo,” he murmured.

*My father. How does she know my father?*

“Who are you to him?”

Her eyes grew distant. “My name is Qi’ra, and my heart will forever belong to your father.” Kylo was immediately grateful he had not touched the alcohol as the walls closed in around him. He would have destroyed the room with his whirlwind of emotions if he wasn't already using the Force to stop his legs from buckling underneath his weight. “We were supposed to run away together, but he made it off Corellia, and…” she shrugged her shoulders, though her eyes belayed her pain, “I did not.”

“He was supposed to come back for me,” she continued after a moment, “but by the time he did, it was too late. Han begged me to go with him, so we could be together. I looked him in the eyes and promised I would, but I left instead. He was my first and only love, but love was not as strong as the power of the dark side. I had to let him go to save him. He didn't understand the world we live in. I never forgot him, though. And I miss him terribly. Now, here you are. You could have been my son if fate were kinder.” She stepped forward then, hesitantly raising her hand, but his mind was still reeling from the shock of it all to fight her. He flinched at the feeling of her gloved hand gently cupping his scarred cheek - the same cheek his father had touched as he died. He flinched, but she didn’t pull away.

Kylo imagined it then—the life without the Force he had always desired. Qi’ra had nothing tying her to a particular world, they could have explored the galaxy together as a family. Han Solo was never meant to live in a home, especially one revolving around politics. Han Solo was always meant to be a smuggler, and if he had been allowed to be who he truly was, perhaps his father
might have been content as a father. He wouldn’t have left his son behind in favor of being lost among the stars if this woman—whom Kylo assumed he had been in search of all along—had been by his side.

Instead of memories of endless arguments and loneliness, Kylo could have had memories of a simple life of love and belonging. With Qi’ra as a mother, he would have had no shadow of his grandfather's legacy, no whispers in his head, no darkness, no lies, no betrayal. Without the Force, he could have been the son his father always wanted. He could have lived a life as a smuggler's son—he could have become a pilot as he had always dreamed. He could have been nobody important to this war. There could have been a life for him that didn't ruin everyone else's lives by his very existence. His father would still be alive and happy. His uncle would have had a successful Jedi academy. His mother would have had a political career without the burden of a child. Luke and Leia would have never been separated. The galaxy would be at peace.

_or would it?_ The voice inside called him to consider.

Sidious as Snoke would have sought another Force-sensitive as an apprentice. And if Kylo hadn't betrayed him to save Rey, he would have been alive and strong as ever. And Rey... what would have happened to her? Either her Force would have remained dormant and she would have suffered on Jakku until she died…or… her Force would have awakened. As the single most powerful Force user in the galaxy, Sidious would have found her; there was no doubt about that. Kylo could have lived a happy life, but without him as her equal in the dark, Rey would have fallen…either by darkness or Sidious's hand. No, this was his destiny. It had all happened as it was supposed to. He had to fall to darkness so she could live in the light.

In his reverie, he hadn't noticed the snapping of the Force or the woman's hand still pressed against his cheek. But the concern in his bondmate's lilting voice seized his attention. “Ben?”

He stepped away from Qi’ra's touch at the sound of his old name.

“Rey,” he breathed, a shudder of fear rippling down his spine as he took stock of the situation. Qi’ra had turned in Rey's direction. He had no doubt she could see her.

“She’s not here physically, is she?” The certainty in the older woman’s voice made it clear that it wasn’t a question. “I've never seen anything like this. Is it the Force?” Qi’ra may not have been Hux, but she was employed by allies of the Order. She held no allegiance to Kylo. What would she do if she discovered who Rey was? The secret that the Supreme Leader had a connection to the last Jedi of the Resistance was worth more credits than he had access to. It was worth more than either of their lives. The woman may have loved his father, but he was the one who killed him. She had no reason to risk her own life by remaining silent.
“What is this?” Rey was... furious. In his distress, he hadn't paused to study her face; it was clear to him as he took in the pinch of her brows, the snarl on her lips, and the fire in her eyes, Rey did not share his unease. She was prepared for battle. He didn’t know why she was angry, but that hardly mattered.

What did I do?

She had been the one who had admitted that everything between them had been a lie—that she was only pretending for his mother's sake. She was the one who told him she loved him in hope of luring him into an ambush. He had been foolish and spared her friends’ lives in the war room and on the Command Bridge, yet he had been betrayed by her. There was no reason for her to be angry with him.

As broken as he had been by her words, he forced himself to remember that none of it mattered at the moment. His only concern was to end the connection and hope the damage done was reparable. There was only one method he considered that would ensure her immediate withdrawal from the situation. It would do nothing favorable for their already strained bond, but he didn’t have a choice.

Setting the cracked tumbler on his desk, he adjusted his gloves in the pompous, self-important way he had observed Hux perfect in his presence. “How dare you disturb the Supreme Leader, Scavenger, while I entertain company of the Order. Leave. Immediately.” He lowered his voice to deliver a tone as pretentious and imperious as possible in his agitation. He only hoped she would take the hint or that his words would anger her enough to leave.

She narrowed her eyes and stood her ground instead. “Scavenger?” she growled.

She's a First Order sympathizer! Leave! he tried through the bond, but it was evident nothing would make it past her mental barriers. She was blocking her thoughts from him, as well as the surroundings on her side of the bond. He couldn’t push through to her over their connection.

While Rey wouldn’t take the hint, Qi’ra was too nosy for anything good to come of it. “Who is she?”

“No one,” he answered, hoping it was enough to push Rey into leaving. He was wrong. She remained fixed in her position, fists clenched, as she stared between him and Qi’ra.
He turned to face Rey. “Get out!” His demand was sharp with vehemence. “Or I will have you removed forcefully.” He analyzed Qi'ra's expression in his peripherals but could not get a read on her line of thinking.

*Please, Rey, don't say anything foolish. Just go.*

“I'm sorry I interrupted your intimate moment, your highness,” Rey spat back and turned to leave. He had never been less conflicted in his decision to not follow her as she walked away from him.

“Wait!” The voice sure as the Force wasn't his, because he wanted nothing more than for her to leave. Qi'ra – apparently – wouldn't make it easy. “This is the young woman,” she realized aloud. “The secret woman you tried to hide your affections for earlier.” Kylo said nothing. What was he to say that wouldn't make it worse? If he confirmed her suspicions, their secret was exposed. If he denied it, she would know the truth anyway. He knew he could not easily hide his ever-growing, conflicted feelings for Rey.

Qi'ra turned to him with another knowing smile. She reached up and tucked a lock of raven hair behind his ear, as his mother had done when he was a child. He thought he had been startled enough by her act of tenderness, but then she grasped his ear and dragged him down her level... and he allowed her to.

“You have your father's heart, Ben” she whispered in his ear, her voice low enough for only him to hear. “Trust me, if there is one piece of advice I wish I could have given myself, it is this: It's never too late. The cost of your allegiance to the dark side is not worth it. They will take everything from you until you have nothing left. They will use her to get to you, and then they will take her from you, too. You will lose her like you lost your father. I can see in your eyes what it has done to you. Don't make that mistake again. If you lose her, you will lose yourself. If you want to save her, you have to make the choice I couldn’t. You have your father's courage; I know you can do what I was never strong enough to do.”

Releasing her hold on him, she chastely kissed his cheek. With a wink, she handed him her empty tumbler before transforming into the confident "curator" once more to face Rey. “Thank you for answering my questions to my satisfaction, Supreme Leader. And thank you for the Corellian Whiskey,” she said, her voice no longer a whisper, “I will be waiting for you in the conference room. And don't worry; this is our little secret.”

As she walked past Rey, she hesitated. “Finding a way out of the darkness seems impossible. If you don't want to lose him, he will need your help.” Qi'ra smiled gently at the woman glaring daggers in her direction, then left through the same door they had entered.
When the blastdoor closed behind her, a heavy silence fell over them. Setting the empty tumbler next to his on the desk, Kylo released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. “That could have been worse.”

Rey turned on her heels. The anger in her eyes told him he was wrong. It was about to get much, much worse. “You disgust me.”

*And you pretended to care.*

He refused to let her see the wound that cut him deeper than any slice of her blade ever could. She insisted the general had falsified the betrayal, but she had committed treason and hadn't been imprisoned. It didn't make sense unless the betrayal was *real*. Betrayal made sense. Everyone always betrayed him. Why would he expect her to be special? “Is that any different than usual, sweetheart?”

He knew his words would antagonize her. He couldn't hurt her as she had hurt him, but he could at least make her angry: he was an expert at that. “Just when I think I know who you are, you do something like this,” she spat.

“That's not my fault; I've only ever been myself with you.” He groaned inwardly at himself for the admission. Her expression softened, the anger fading into... something else.

“You broke my heart, Ben,” she whispered, her eyes glistening. No, not this; he needed her angry. His resolve around her was already limited, but he couldn't feign indifference when she cried. He thought of her words to her friends, searching for the anger he needed. But he only managed to deepen the wound further.

“Yeah, well, the feeling is mutual, Rey.”

“Everything I did was to keep us alive!” she shouted, caught somewhere between anger and sorrow. “What did you want me to do, tell him the truth about us?”

“What *is* the truth about us?” He had meant to say it cruelly, to maintain the semblance that he hated her, but it came out as a weak rasp.

“The truth doesn't matter; you're not the man I thought you were.”
“Is this because I called you ‘Scavenger?’” he scoffed, gesturing toward the conference room. “She's a sympathizer of the First Order! You could have exposed everything between us!”

Her eyes narrowed resentfully. “I was not the one about to ‘expose everything,’ Ben.”

“What?” He shut his eyes and shook his head, attempting to understand the absurdity of her statement. “What... what are you talking about?

“I thought something terrible had happened to you, because I felt your overwhelming emotions in the bond! I came here thinking you had been captured. But you were more than okay with some woman old enough to be your mother with her hands all over you, on your scar, but you didn’t care that she was touching you. Or whispering in your ear and kissing you! And you’ve been drinking, Ben? I thought you hated that!”

She thinks I... she thinks we...

He knew Rey was angry and it wouldn't help the situation, but he couldn't help the feeling bubbling up. He laughed. A deep rumble in his chest that caught him off guard as much as it did Rey. He couldn't remember the last time he laughed with mirth. It should have terrified him; the façade he had carefully built around himself for years was cracking as light entered. No, not entered—escaped. It should have caused the reemergence of the long-dead voices that convinced him of weaknesses, but it felt... good to laugh. It was as if a weight had been temporarily lifted.

Rey leveled an impatient stare at him, but there was something in her eyes when she caught him laughing. It was far more dangerous than anger. He cleared his throat. “You're right about one thing,” he said as he suppressed the residual chuckle, “She is old enough to be my mother. In fact, she easily could have been. She's my father's first love. He lost her to the power of the dark side.”

“So you weren't...”

“No, Rey. She was my father's...They probably...That's... disturbing.” He suppressed a shudder. He could almost see the cocky grin on his father's face. He knew the old man would have enjoyed the awkward conversation immensely. He would likely have added descriptive details to ensure the images were burned into his nightmares. But there was a different nightmare that featured his father now. He shook the dark thoughts from his mind. “Regardless, you seem to have this idea that I have any interest in the women that throw themselves at me. I thought you would know me better than that; you have been in my memories.”
“I also believed you would never touch alcohol,” she said. The anger was gone, but her tone was still laced with disappointment.

“I didn't.” He gestured to the cracked tumbler on his desk. “But I would have; I need that holocron. If I'm going to pay five billion credits for it, I think I can chance one drink.”

Her eyes widened, and she scoffed in disgust. “Five billion credits? Ben, have you lost your mind? Do you know how many medical facilities could be built for Outer Rim planets? How many starving civilizations that would feed? How many slaves that would free? What happened to wanting to change the galaxy for the better?”

“Save your righteousness, Rey,” he warned indignantly. “If I don't have this holocron, they will suffer much worse.”

“What holocron?”

He considered for a moment whether he trusted her with that information.

_If she reveals this to the Resistance..._

He must have been projecting, because she immediately reacted in offense. “Seriously, Ben? What have I done now to warrant your distrust in me? What I said to Poe was to protect us both. I have never told him _anything_ you told me in confidence, even though I know I should.” Her words maintained their righteous tone, but there was conflict in her eyes as if even _she_ didn’t believe what she said. “I am the _only_ friend you have. Don't forget that.”

He groaned in resignation. “It's the Telos Holocron. It has thousands of years of Sith doctrine and secrets. And I need it, so I should get back to...”

“I thought you weren't a Sith!” It was clear she was frustrated with him—for what, he could only guess—and was not going to leave without a fight. “I thought you wanted them to die as much as the Jedi!”

“I do,” his patience was running thin. “I need the holocron to stop a superweapon the First Order
The understanding that he was trying to sabotage his own military's superweapon was not lost on either of them. But he knew she would not dare mention it after her promise during their recent impasse on beliefs. “Why can't you stop the superweapon yourself? You are the Supreme Leader.”

He sank into the chair at his desk, pinching the bridge of his nose in exhaustion. “You'll be delighted to know there is dissent and distrust in the ranks as to whether I am a competent leader as of late. If I interfere with the weapon, I risk a coup. And then I will have no power to stop it.”

Rey seemed to feel mercy toward his wearied appearance. Ben, you can leave before it's too late, she wanted to say. He could sense it in her thoughts as if she had whispered it, but she didn’t give life to the words. Perhaps she knew the words were hollow. Perhaps she remembered she had made him a promise, or perhaps she knew it was a lie. He couldn’t leave. She stepped closer, studying him as if she were only just seeing him.

“What knowledge does the holocron have to stop it?” she asked carefully, knowing she was asking him to reveal critical information. If only she knew that he would tell her anything. “What kind of weapon is this? Another Starkiller?”

He met her eyes reluctantly, clasping his hand around his jaw as if it would be enough to stop the truth from escaping his lips. “No, it doesn’t take life; it restores it.” She stared up at him questioningly, ignorant of the secrets he knew.

He sighed.

It wasn’t that he was taking a significant risk in trusting her. Even if she told her general, it would matter little. What could Dameron possibly do with the information? And if Kylo fell before he could destroy the machine, she should know what she was up against – if Blue didn’t find her with his information first.

Either way, it felt different because he was providing direct secrets about the First Order. It felt as if it would change everything between them. He feared it would give her false hope. And yet, he found himself confessing the secret that had been weighing heavy on his mind like the weak man he was. “The machine can reincarnate the dead by taking the life of another Force-user. The holocron contains information about how to prevent the weapon from reincarnating Darth Sidious, who was already reincarnated once as Snoke.”
Chapter End Notes

Jealousy

A character experiences jealousy toward another character, but it is a misunderstanding
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“No...” Rey staggered backward, slamming into his desk behind her as her entire body was seized with panic. The tumblers crashed to the floor, shattering into pieces. Kylo could have softened the fall or even halted it completely, but his attention was fully focused on her. “No, Ben, he... he can't come back.”

“Rey...” Kylo stood, grasping her arm to ground her before her terror gave way to darkness. He was calm, rational, but he didn’t know what she knew. Kylo didn’t know the damage Snoke had already done in death; she had almost killed the man she loved because of that creature. She couldn’t fathom the full implication of Snoke’s true identity yet, but she was beginning to understand the depths of his obsession with the legacy of Darth Vader, the Skywalkers and Ben Solo.

Oh, Ben. How long had he known about the machine? How long had he known Snoke was Darth Sidious? Rey couldn’t be angry with him, not when she kept the whisper from him. She wanted to tell him about the identity of the whisper in the darkness, but she feared what that would do to him. What if revealing that secret brought Sidious back to torture his thoughts again? She couldn’t do that to him.

As Kylo gripped her arm, she felt the Force vibrating between them at every point of contact. Through his touch flowed a calming warmth. She was doing it again; she was drawing on his light. Unlike the last time she had accessed his light over the bond, she wasn’t using it to repair an injury, but to fight the darkness. She remembered how he had reacted before – how he recoiled in unrestrained disgust. Refusing to meet his stare, she gently removed her arm from his grip before he could push her away.

Kylo moved his hands to her shoulders and dipped his head, catching her gaze, so she could see the truth in his eyes. There was only concern there. For her. He cared more about reassuring her than how he was doing it. “I won't let him come back,” he said. “I killed him to protect us; to protect you after you flew half-way across the galaxy to protect me. I promise you, I would die to protect you from him, Rey.”

The look in his eye was heavy with implication. He cared. It might not have been in the way she cared about him, but there was no denying that he did care. Guilt rolled in her stomach. He would
die to protect her from Sidious, but he had no idea that the creature was already inside her head. She should have trusted him, more than anyone, because he knew what that was like.

It wasn’t too late; Kylo could still help her, and maybe she could help him, too. If she could draw upon his light to fight the darkness, maybe he could draw on hers. They could help each other, but he would have to trust her. That would require her to be trustworthy. And she knew what stood in her way. She had to find the courage to tell him the truth, about the voices in her head, even if she knew what it could do.

“Ben, there’s something I need to –”

Before she could finish, his comlink beeped once, and she heard his general's nasally voice. “Supreme Leader!”

Kylo released her shoulders and his demeanor visibly changed. A tension immediately snapped through him as he straightened. The gentleness of his features transformed into a hardened mask. “What have I told you about interrupting meetings, Hux!”

“I was made aware of the little detour off course authorized under your orders, my lord, but we have just received an urgent report from our allies. I’m certain a platoon would be more than adequate to aid you in your quest to recover the ‘dark side’ weapon –

“Damn it, Bazine…” Kylo growled under his breath,

“...and a better use of resources. If it is absolutely necessary for our military to stay the course to collect your five billion credit purchase, then it is imperative to authorize my use of the command shuttle so I can leave immediately to attend to your failure.” Kylo’s eyes flashed with the same raw fear that settled in her chest. What if the First Order had somehow found the Resistance or Dantooine? If the Resistance was captured, was there anything Kylo could do to protect them?

Her bondmate lifted the device and flipped a switch. Hux's blue-tinted hologram projected from the device.

“What is so urgent? Barkhesh? The Resistance can wait.” Barkhesh? They've set course to Barkhesh? Kylo had told her the First Order didn’t know about Barhesh. He had told her he hadn’t set course to intercept her friends. It matted little that the Resistance wouldn’t be there when the First Order arrived. She had trusted him, and he had lied.
“Not Barkhesh,” the general answered. “Kamino.”

With that word, Kylo’s hardened features twisted into something… pained. His focus shifted from the general to stare through the hologram to meet her gaze instead. His eyes were narrowed in suspicion, beseeching almost. She was certain they reflected her own.

“The clones?” He asked the hologram, but his fierce stare remained fixed on her. His words were lost in the thundering of her pulse. *He knew* the First Order was coming for them – had likely ordered it – and couldn’t even be bothered to look guilty. He was too busy studying *her* reaction. In her own fear, she didn’t consider the intensity of his.

“I warned you, Ren –”

His only outward physical reaction was a slow exhale as his eyes fluttered closed. His voice was even and accepting, perhaps too accepting, but his emotions through the bond were more tumultuous. “What happened?”

It wasn’t until the general uttered the next words that the significance of his pleading stare finally pierced through the cracks in her anger like ice. “A disease... a genetic anomaly... who knows. They're all a waste, every single one. The Kaminoans insist there are four unaccounted for, but they believe they could have attempted to escape and fallen to their deaths. *I told* you this would happen, that any history holobook would emphatically narrate their weaknesses, but you wouldn't –”

His eyes flashed with rage back to his general. “Proceed carefully, Hux.”

The general cleared his throat, straightening his uniform. “It is necessary to alter course to assist the Kaminoans in determining the cause of the clones' mysterious failure. They have assured me they will be more than transparent in the –”

“No need, maintain course.” His words were conversational, inconsequential, but she flinched when she was met with the jagged barriers of his side of the bond as he shut her out. Poe had done it; he had destroyed Kylo’s limited trust in her, he had turned the man she loved against her. And she had given him the key to do it. She *knew* Poe would use the vial, but she thought she had time – time to tell her bondmate what she was forced to do to protect them, time to get Kylo away from the First Order before his army fell. Now it was too late. Perhaps it always had been.
“Ren –” Kylo switched off the comlink and let it fall to the floor, watching its descent from his fingers with rapt interest. He remained staring at it long after it had clattered at his feet, as if it held the secrets to the universe. She expected an immediate explosive reaction – rage, panic, denial, something. He didn't say a word as he stared at the fallen comlink, and she wasn't foolish enough to break the silence first.

A mirthless smile crossed his lips. “There is no need to alter course to determine the cause, is there, Rey?” At her name, his eyes met hers. She studied them, desperate for a clue to the thoughts raging behind his cold, dark walls. There was nothing; they were empty, devoid of emotion. Not cold or callous or hateful, just hollow.

“No,” she said, but she wouldn’t allow him to manipulate the conversation, not until he answered for what he had done. At least she wasn’t a liar. “Where is your fleet headed, Ben?”

His eyes lost focus before he turned away. “What do you suppose killed them?”

“Did you send your army after us?” she demanded, holding her ground. “Was it a lie when you said you didn’t give them our location?”

His stubbornness bled through into the sharpness in his voice. “What do you suppose killed them?”

“You first, Ben.”

Kylo studied her, the muscle under his eye twitching as his gaze bounced back and forth between her eyes. Rey imagined he would find another retort to gain control of the conversation, but he huffed and glanced away. “The general discovered your location from the repetitive answers of the recon troopers you persuaded with the Force.”

“You couldn’t stop him?”

“Not without risking mutiny, no,” he answered. “I knew I could never stop them from finding the Resistance. It was an inevitability. All I could do was give you enough time to escape. I used mind persuasion on my officers on the bridge. If my general came to them asking to change course to Barkhesh, I ensured they responded that I had already set course there. Then they were supposed to alter course and alert me on Master Comms. That was my plan, that was all I could do to protect
you – the rest has always been up to you. I can’t save your friends Rey if the First Order finds them. But I have done *everything* I can to make sure they don’t.”

If setting course to the world the Resistance had been hiding was his idea of “everything” he could do, then his version of “everything” wasn’t good enough. What if Maz hadn’t discovered those coordinates to Dantooine? What if Poe had chosen to stay and fight? How could he have been so certain? How did he know they would have had enough time? What if they *hadn’t*?

It hurt to believe that Kylo would chance her life so easily. “When were you planning to tell me?”

“I wasn’t.” There was no hesitation or reluctance in his tone. She was grateful he was at least honest with her about that. “I know you’ve already left.”

“How?”

“Logical deduction,” he replied matter-of-factly. “After the war room, if you were telling me the truth – that I was not your assignment – then Dameron would have imprisoned you either with the Resistance or on Barkhesh for treason. He would have evacuated the remaining Resistance members, because he doesn’t have a large enough army to ambush the entire First Order. Your general is not stupid. If he believed you were a liability, if he believed you could draw me in, he would have used you against me in an ambush by threatening your life again.

“If you lied – if it *was* your mission to turn me – then he would have had no reason to imprison you and no reason to risk your life in an ambush. Knowing I had seen the temple and likely would come for you – and the First Order could return with more reconnaissance ships – he wouldn’t risk the lives of his people to stay there. I do not doubt that within twenty-four hours the Resistance had abandoned Barkhesh, and I have no doubt there could still be a trap waiting there for me. But I *am* certain you are not there, because I know what I am to you.”

She could have argued that she wasn’t lying to him, that he was wrong, but what he said made *sense*. Poe had no reason to let her go, save for the vial she had given him, the vial that had killed the clones – the vial her bondmate had entrusted her with. So instead, she argued that “he could have left me on Barkhesh to rot.”

Kylo was in no mood for “what ifs.”

“You’re not imprisoned, Rey, and you’re hiding your side of the bond. You’re with them.”
He was correct, of course, but it didn’t ease the sting of his words. “And if I had been on Barkhesh?”

“I would have ensured you were not,” he said unequivocally. His voice was still edged with agitation, but there was a momentary underlying softness. Part of her wanted to believe him that he was certain they were safe. But they were flying across the galaxy and could be intercepted at any moment. Of course, they weren’t safe. He couldn’t protect them, despite his certainty that he could.

“But you can’t – ”

His mood changed instantly, as if he had suddenly decided he was tired of arguing with her. His impatient over-confidence transformed into hyper-focused rage. “I answered your questions, now answer mine,” he said, voice low with warning. “What do you suppose had the capability of destroying an entire army?”

Rey sighed in defeat. Though they were indefensible, he had given her the answers she demanded. It was time for her to admit to the role she had played in Poe’s plan. Without the darkness, it was nearly impossible to hold onto the anger as it faded to guilt. She wished she could. It was far easier to be disappointed in someone than have them disappointed in her. She sniffled as her vision blurred. “A virus.”

He nodded, puffing out his cheeks as he drew in the Force around them. “But not just any virus—the Blue Shadow Virus, one genetically modified with the clone’s DNA. The Kaminoans created it for me, put it in a vial as another one of my fail-safes. The last time I saw it, I was handing that vial…to you. Tell me, Rey, where is it now?”

His tone was calm, even, emotionless.

Deadly.

“I can expla –”

“Where… is it?” he ground out. His entire body tensed as he awaited her answer.
She should have known. Poe may have told her that _she_ would use it to destroy the army after she returned with her weapon, but she shouldn’t have trusted that. He had _proven_ he couldn’t be trusted, and she shouldn’t have been naïve enough to believe he would fall for her deception. She should have known better, but it still hurt that Poe had purposefully done this. It wasn’t an overreaction to treason; this was meant to _hurt_ her. What hurt her the most, however, was what it did to _him_.

The first drop of sorrow escaped down her cheek. “I don't know, Ben!”

“You don't know?” He shook his head as he huffed humorlessly. Pressing his lips together, he blinked rapidly. “But you don't seem surprised that they’re dead. Am I wrong to presume you know exactly who did it?”

“No.”

His eyes glistened with betrayal, and she wished more than anything that she hadn’t been the one to cause it. He turned away as if it pained him to even look at her. “Who did it, Rey?” She knew who he suspected, but after everything that had happened in the war room, she couldn’t permit her lips to form the name. “Say it.”

“Poe,” she whispered. “But you don't understand, he –”

“Your general didn’t tell you, did he? What those clones looked like?” It was an odd question. Why would it matter what they looked like? “Did you know,” he continued, “at this stage of development, the third generation were only children, and the fourth generation were infants. How will you rationalize this away? Because they’re clones? Or because it was him, and not me?”

“That's not fair! I didn’t… he wouldn’t –”

“Enough!” His head tilted slightly over his shoulder so he could see her. “It’s just war, right?”

“Ben…” His name was a plea, but she couldn’t find the resolve to argue any further. More tears slipped past her defenses as the severity of what she had done settled between them. He had willingly handed her the vial as a failsafe to be used in the event he fell to mutiny. He had been struggling with the will to _live_ and he had entrusted her. It had meant something to him, and she had betrayed that. She hadn’t done it to hurt him; it was the only reason she wasn’t imprisoned, but she should have told him. She should have told him so many things.
This was why Poe had let her go. He wanted Kylo to believe that she had used him and betrayed him. He wanted Kylo to hate her. What she still didn’t understand was – why? If he wanted to use her as an ambush, why would he ensure that the man she loved hated her? Wouldn’t it be easier to use her love to draw him in? “Ben, this is what Poe –”

Nothing was soothing about the deep rumble of his voice when he spoke again. “How did he get the vial?”

“Please, just listen –”

He shook his head but remained facing away from her. Clearly, he had no interest in studying her eyes this time. He was resolute in his desire for his version of the truth. “No, it’s simple. How did he get it?”

Rey felt helpless as he refused to allow her to explain. She wasn’t loyal to Poe; she hadn’t given him the vial to hurt Kylo, she had no other choice. Poe wouldn’t have released her unless she gave him something to prove her “loyalty.” If she hadn’t given it to him, he would have waited for Kylo to find them. He would have killed the man she loved. She did what she had to do.

She knew she couldn’t trust her general, not after what he did in the war room, but she had believed that he would wait for her to destroy the clones after Ilum. Why wouldn’t he? If she destroyed the clones, it would prove her loyalty and hurt her bondmate. What reason would Poe have to damage the delicate truce between her and Kylo before his ambush?

Ultimately, his reasons for destroying those clones before she finished on Ilum didn’t matter. It had been foolish to believe Poe wouldn’t further betray her. He still had very good reasons to destroy that army. Without those clones, the First Order was weakened. Poe Dameron had given the Resistance a better chance to save the galaxy.

Ultimately, she should have told Kylo what she had used as a bargaining chip for their freedom. During the fall out over what had happened in the war room – when he had barely spoken to her – it hadn’t been her greatest concern. If she had told him herself, perhaps he would have given her a chance to explain. Perhaps he would have understood. But she hadn’t, and now Kylo had every reason to hate her. Or he would, when she finally admitted the truth.

She was grateful she wouldn’t have to witness the pain in his eyes when she let the words shatter between them. “I gave it to him.”
“Willingly?” he rasped. His tone was reluctant, as if he weren’t certain he wanted to know. He forced himself to turn and face the truth, eyes downcast. She hiccupped a sob. If he would just allow her to explain…

“Yes, but –”

He nodded, raising his hand in a plea for her to stop. His lip curled as he refused to look at her. “That’s all that matters, then.”

It wasn’t all that mattered, however. “Please Ben, just let me explain – I had to do it. Poe wouldn’t –”

“There’s nothing to explain. You did what anyone else would do,” he said, eyes focused on something distant. “My mistake was believing that you’re not like anyone else.”

Rey would rather have him ignite his lightsaber and run her through with it; it would have hurt less. She couldn’t be angry with him; she had betrayed him. She wouldn’t have cared to listen to his reasons if he betrayed her, why would he care about hers? And she could be angry with Poe all she wanted, but he did what he had to do for the Resistance. What else was there to say?

She could feel the Force vibrating, and she waited for the room to be as empty and hollow as he would leave her heart.

Ben, I’m sorry.

The Force snapped through her, and the taut, invisible string between them fell slack. He was gone.
Chapter End Notes

Mention of death
Chapter Notes

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As Rey disappeared across the galaxy, Kylo flinched with the snap in the Force. This feeling that consumed him was different than betrayal. He didn’t know what it was, but it threatened to bring him to his knees. He had trusted her with the vial, but it had been far more than just the vial to him. And she had willingly handed it to Poe Dameron. If he never had to see that man again, it would be too soon. What she did was unforgivable, but there were more pressing—distracting—matters to attend to.

Kylo spun on his heels, refocusing on the woman trafficking the artifact he had paid for so handsomely. He had left her waiting, but he could blame it on an urgent holocall from his general. Technically, it was the truth. Stalking through the blastdoor, he burst into the conference room
with an apology on his lips—the empty conference room. A shiver of fear rolled down his spine, the severity of the situation settling over him. There was no evidence she had ever been there and, worse, no proof the artifact he needed to defeat Sidious was at the coordinates she had provided. He could alert troopers to halt her departure, but he sensed she had already found her way off the ship.

The destroyer lurched as they exited the last hyperspace jump, and he felt it—a high concentration of darkness in the Force, stronger than anything he had ever felt before, even in the presence of Sidious. He could almost feel the artifact wrapping its dark tendrils around his soul, calling to him, beguiling him to its will.

“Supreme Leader,” a voice rasped over his comlink. “Maintenance has the new… furnishings for your chambers, sir.”

Kylo didn’t need to step back into his chambers to know that the bed was still in tatters after he lashed out following the clash with members of the Resistance—when Poe Dameron nearly killed Rey to prove a point. “Have it installed when I’m on-world. But it will require a cleaning crew first. Droids only.”

“And the repair crew?”

“No need,” he sighed. “Nothing significant was destroyed.” It was a lie. Certainly, it was only a bed that had been destroyed. But he had lain on that bed, in those sheets, with her. Both Luke and Sidious had trained away his sentiment toward possessions, but losing that reminder of her was more troubling than he cared to admit.

The Master Comms signaled from the Command Bridge. “Supreme leader, we have arrived at the provided coordinates.”

Kylo had felt the ship exit hyperspace; he knew they had been close. But that didn’t stop the foreboding dread that prickled on the back of his neck.

Where are we?

As if compelled by the artifact itself, or perhaps something darker, he stormed from the room into his chambers. He was suffocating on darkness as he entered the room, his mind becoming heavy under a powerful shadow. The room was impossibly cold even as the black surfaces were
illuminated like a raging inferno, reflecting the red and orange light emanating through the transparisteel. He moved to the viewport, though he instinctively knew what fiery planet he would find them orbiting.

As he stared out at the rivers of lava, Blue nudged into his knee. The droid had been hidden in his chambers during the meeting, but the last jolt from hyperspace had likely drawn him out. Kylo had barely accepted their location by the time the droid began asking his string of questions.

“What’s wrong, Blue, is that I don’t want to go down there.”

The droid was still cheerful, ignorant of the dangers they both faced if he went down there. “Because I can feel the darkness from here. This is stronger than anything I’ve ever felt. I’m… afraid.” He knew he should want it—the power of the darkness—but he didn’t know if he could do it anymore.

The droid repeated his favorite question. Why?

“I don’t know,” he whispered, “what monsters will find me down there. I don’t know what it will do to me. I want you to hide and not come out until you’re sure it’s me.” Blue was more hesitant with his next question.

“Because I don’t know who will come back.”

Finally, the droid began to understand the severity of the consequences of Kylo going on-world. His following beeps were a plea. “I have to go; there’s something down there I need, and it’s more important than anything—even my freedom.”

The darkness called him to the viewport, the magnetism drawing his feet forward nearly against his will. The sight was a confirmation of his fears. Thankfully, the darkness broke through and swiftly consumed his growing dread. When he spoke again, his voice was emotionless.

“No, it’s not that type of battle; this isn’t Concordia.”

When the droid asked his final question, Kylo could barely him over the howl of the dark. He stared out the viewport at the fiery world. How could he explain where they were? Did the droid know what Hell was? He decided to side with the truth. “Mustafar.”
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See the end of the chapter for more notes
Rey walked down a corridor toward the engineering bay to help Chewbacca. She needed something to do with her hands, something to distract her from the destiny that was hellbent on crashing upon her. Kylo would hate her after what she had done—she was certain of it. He would never forgive her. He had never forgiven anyone, and he was right—she was just like everyone else.

He would never believe the truth, and she likely would never have the chance to tell him. In her panic, her voice had refused to work, to explain, to apologize, to beg for forgiveness. She had craved for him to touch her or scream at her or anything that didn't seem so final. But she had felt paralyzed – not by the Force, but by her own guilt.
The galaxy, however, had greater problems than their broken bond. Not only was Snoke… Sidious… that monster—whom she watched her bondmate cut in half—able to find her in her darkness, but Kylo had spent five billion credits to stop a weapon that could bring him back. Or perhaps it was better said that Kylo had spent five billion credits that might stop a weapon that would bring him back. What if he failed?

Sidious had attempted to manipulate her into killing Kylo. He obviously intended to enact revenge upon his former apprentice for taking his life. He had abandoned his strategy to convince her to do it, but if the First Order created that machine, he wouldn't need her. If Sidious returned, Kylo's life was forfeit. And likely hers, as well. There would be no one to stop Sidious's destruction of the Resistance. She had to help Kylo destroy that machine before it was too late, even if it put her own life in danger.

She was committing treason by continuing to communicate with Kylo over the bond, but it was for the good of the Resistance; why couldn't they see that? If she believed they wouldn’t immediately imprison her, she would have told them about the weapon that was far more dangerous than her bond. Even if she hated her general, she knew it was something she would likely have to reveal to him. What would it matter if she did – Kylo already hated her for her role in destroying an army she was grateful was no longer a threat to her friends.

The lines of right and wrong, good and evil had become muddled. She didn't know what was righteous and just anymore. Saving the Resistance by trusting in their enemy? Committing treason to protect the galaxy? Joining the Hutts to eliminate evil?Murdering a child army while breaking the trust of the man she loved? Right was the antithesis of wrong, good the antithesis of evil, dark the antithesis of light, the First Order the antithesis of the Resistance. Or at least, it should have been.

It should have been a linear scale with the two extremes at both ends—one side weighted low with evil, wrongness, darkness, and the other raised high in goodness, righteousness, light. But the sides, at least in her eyes, had become balanced, symmetrical, like opposing sides of a mirror. They were opposite, yet interchangeable.

Poe and his decisions had good intentions, but they were fraught with wrongs that Rey could not reconcile. Kylo had made his decisions with his own brand of good intentions that Rey likewise refused to endorse. Kylo's decisions had brought him to head an institution of evil, yet he had saved her life, committed treason to protect her, even protected her friends. No, he was not as evil as the others believed. And then there was Poe. His decisions had brought him to head an institution of righteousness, yet he had threatened her life, he had joined forces with an evil entity, he had created an ambush to kill the man she loved. Now he had killed clones—trained, propaganda-fed weapons—but also children. She didn’t know how to make peace with that. He said he wanted what was best for the galaxy, but was murder best for the galaxy?
They both said they fought for a better galaxy, they both believed in achieving that through necessary evil, and they both had made morally ambiguous choices in the pursuit of victory. She couldn't in good conscience stand behind the actions of either man. Her life had become a battle of contradictions; there were no easy answers in war.

Her fears of finding her place in that Force-forsaken war were interrupted when she saw Finn. Ever since the confrontation with Kylo, they had spent their time mutually avoiding each other, which was no small feat when they were ensured to cross paths several times a day. They exchanged pleasantries, of course, but they never talked about the Kylo-sized Bantha in the room. Though, come to think of it, Kylo was the size of a Bantha, so perhaps there was no need for the qualifier. Either way, it hurt. She felt as if she was losing her best friend, her brother, her rock.

In their uncomfortable silence, she wondered if perhaps he had felt the growing chasm between them long before the confrontation. Her life had become a series of lies, secrets, and clandestine meetings with the enemy. It was never her intention to hurt any of them, especially Finn, but perhaps she had much to learn about what composed a good friend. As profoundly as she wanted to avoid a difficult conversation—and Rey didn't have much experience in that arena—she knew she had to speak to him about it eventually.

*I might as well get it over with.*

"Finn?" Rey asked cautiously, approaching him as he sat at a table, immersed in a game. He visibly grimaced. She knew he still felt betrayed that she had chosen to protect Kylo. But at the time, she had believed he had left her no choice. Couldn't he see that?

"Yeah, Rey?" He didn’t look up from the game he was watching on the dejarik table. Either he was engrossed in trying to understand the rules or he was avoiding her.

She shifted awkwardly on her feet. "Is everything okay... between you and me?" She wasn't as socially adept as her friends, but she knew their relationship was far from copacetic. She just didn’t know what else to say. Even if he screamed at her, all she wanted was to stop pretending. Maybe she couldn’t fix what happened with Kylo, but she believed she could fix this.

"Yes, of course," he replied, his tone high and unconvincing.

Rey sighed. Finn was going to be difficult, and she was terrible at confrontation. It was a recipe for disaster. But it was worth it if she got her friend back. "So we're going to pretend the thing with
Ben....” The mention of his name visibly affected Finn, so she decided it was best to ease into the truth. “…Kylo…didn't happen?” She knew she should have been honest with him from the beginning, but she was trying.

Finn dropped his head, his hands grasped tightly between his knees. He exhaled slowly, puffing out his cheeks in agitation. "I think it's better if I pretend it didn't happen, Rey.”

"Finn...please.” She sat down next to him and placed her hand on the table. “You're my best friend; I love you. I feel like I'm losing you both.” Her voice wavered with emotion. He finally looked up at her, his eyes reflecting her pain.

"I don't know how to feel about it,” he said, maintaining a steady tone, though it was edged with anger… or resentment… or disappointment. It was much easier to read emotions when she could sense them over a bond. “It's not who I thought you were, Rey. The friend I know wouldn't lie, keep secrets—or willingly climb into bed with the enemy." Her stomach twisted with his accusations. Technically, he was right, but the way he said it felt as if it cheapened the complex connection that had grown between her and Kylo.

"It's complicated. When we're together, it's not First Order vs The Resistance. It's Ben and Rey.” At least, it had been for the blissful moments before their sides had done everything in their power to tear them apart. Everything in the galaxy seemed against them, but she had never wanted to fight for anything as deeply as she wanted to fight for her bondmate.

Rey could see the same impugning look in Finn’s eyes that Kylo had given her when she tried to argue with him. How could she make Finn understand when he clearly didn't want to?

Finn struggled to continue speaking in an even tone as the vexation bled through. "Rey, don’t be so naïve. Kylo is still Supreme Leader of the First Order, and you are still the last hope for the Resistance. Pretending you're not doesn't change that.”

"I know that. I do,” she grasped his hand, imploring him to see what she could see in Kylo. Or at least believe her. “But I still have hope he will turn. There is still light left in him; I've seen it." How could she prove to him he was wrong? How could she show him the truth about Kylo when Kylo refused to be there? How did she explain the man was everything she said when he still fought for the First Order? Was there any point in trying? Why did it matter to her that her friends saw what she saw?

"He kidnapped you... tortured you... tortured Poe... slaughtered an entire village on your planet... he tried to kill me... he tried to kill the everyone in the Resistance... he blew up the Hosnian
system... He killed Han, his father, in front of our eyes... and he is responsible for the deaths of Luke and Leia... and that's the evil you know about. How much light could this guy possibly have left?” His voice was sharp and derisive, his attempt to temper his anger deteriorating with each word. She could taste the venom in his contention.

Rey turned his large hand over in hers, trying to find the words that would convince him that her bondmate had changed. "I know you don’t understand, but when he and I touched hands on Ahch-To, I saw his destiny...a destiny where he turns...a destiny I am a part of. I saw his memories. He saved my life. He's changing, Finn, he's different now. If you give him a chance, you could see Ben the way I see him.”

"If he's changed, why isn't he here fighting beside us? Or at least not trying to kill us? Have you ever stopped to think that maybe this highly-trained and powerful Sith is manipulating these visions with the Force to trick you or turn you against us?” Finn was trying to be sympathetic, but she could sense his condescension. Did he believe her too foolish to know the difference?

Rey felt the anger rising with the desire to lash out, but she had done enough damage with her reactionary words. She huffed a breath and waited for the anger to fade before continuing. "No, my soul knows his. There is no deception. He is the only one who has never lied to me. He isn't ready yet, I think he's afraid to leave. He doesn't want to turn me against you; he just wants me to be safe.”

Her explanations only served to make her friend more heated in his assertions. "You talk about him like he's not the cold, ruthless murderer that we all know him to be.”

"There's a different side that you don't see. A side that is gentle and warm and sensitive, but broken and pained and lost. He is passionate and unwavering in his convictions, as misguided as they can be. He's honest but unforgiving. He is a trained warrior, yes, but he can also be content in holding me close to him, gently playing with my hair and..."

"I don't think I'm ready to hear these things, Rey,” Finn interrupted resentfully, raising his hand to stop her. “Seeing you wrapped up in his arms, half dressed... in bed with him was... sickening for me. And then you wouldn't let me kill him; you chose him over us. It’s hard to accept. What happened to you?” His pained eyes pleaded with her to be the woman he thought she was. She didn’t know how to be the person he believed her to be and the person she was with her bondmate – the person she truly was, darkness and all.

Rey sighed, searching for the words. How could she explain how their connection had changed when she didn't fully understand it herself? She reached for him again, trying everything in her power to make him stay. "We're... connected by the Force, and he's the only other Force user left. We hated each other, and I said awful things to him, but he was there for me and understood me in
ways no one else could. As the bond grew stronger, I saw behind Kylo's mask…and found Ben. And something changed between us. I don't know when or how, but during our arguments, something changed. We didn't truly open up to each other until that night you found us together. I didn't choose him over you, by the way. I chose to end the fight. I took the blaster from you before he was forced to defend himself... or me. And I didn't...we didn't... all we did was hold each other. Nothing else happened. We were just consoling each other; his mother died!

"Yeah, I bet. He seemed so broken up about it when he destroyed the bridge on the Raddus," he spat. "And, trust me, the Supreme Leader of the First Order did not just want to cuddle."

"Finn..."

"No, Rey," his tone was certain, unequivocal; he refused to listen to her excuses. "You grew up alone on a desert planet, and you don't understand the First Order as I do. I've heard stories of what the officers do to prisoners. You have no idea what men like that want to take from you."

"Ben is not like..."

"How do you know?!" he exploded, ripping his hands from hers as he stood. "How could you even know what that man is capable of beyond what he tells you? He already forced himself inside your mind! How could you trust a word he says? He wants to use you, Rey, either for your powers or your body...."

"Is that all I can be to someone?" her tone was sharp with resentment. "Is that all I am to you?"

"Of course, not..."

"Because I may be the lonely, ignorant girl from the desert planet, but I understand 'what men want to take from me,' trust me. There were still unscrupulous men on my planet. And Ben has done awful things, but not that. It was his job to extract information from me, and he used the Force. I've used it to take information, too. If I had been in his position, and I could have found information on Snoke, I would have done the same thing. I would have done worse. It's war. I was the enemy."

She sniffled, wiping her tears on the back of her hand. "What he did to Poe was torture; what Snoke did to me was torture. Why can’t you see he was different toward me, Finn, when he did his best not to hurt me? Even if you want to call what he did as my enemy “torture,” he didn't even touch me in the interrogation room, let alone try to…. do that to me. Don't turn that into something
it wasn’t, just because I'm not a man like Poe. I think I proved I can handle him perfectly fine when I nearly killed him in the snow.” She glared at Finn until his shoulders slumped slightly.

“Don't pretend the Resistance doesn't interrogate people for information, either,” she continued. “Rose electrocuted you when you first met. If they use electro-shock prods against potential deserters like you, what do you think they use against their enemies? Will you even bat an eye at the extreme measures they will take if they ever detain Ben? Or is it only ethical when the Resistance does it? I guarantee that the Hutts have tortured and forced themselves upon the female sentients they keep as slaves, and they are now our closest allies,” she paused, realizing how similar her words were to arguments she had heard from Kylo. Was she defending what he did? There was no excuse; what he'd done to her was wrong. Then why did it matter so much to her that Finn knew Kylo hadn't done anything like that to her? Even at his worst, he hadn’t shown a side like that to her. How did war make right and wrong so murky and convoluted?

“And I know people. We all keep each other at arm’s length with half-truths, lies, omissions, or false smiles while we put everyone around us in neat little boxes with labels. We write Kylo off as a 'monster,' because it’s easier than understanding him. Understanding him makes us face the darkest parts of ourselves. And we prefer to be the person we think everyone else wants us to be, rather than expose ourselves by showing them who we are. I do it. You do it. Everyone does it, and that is why you believe I can't know the true him. But I have a bond with him; I know him in ways you'll never understand.

“And, no, I am not saying that you can't know intimacy if you don't have a bond, but there are still secrets and repressed thoughts and emotions that we keep locked away for ourselves, because no one can be one hundred percent themselves with another person. We don't even know ourselves one hundred percent. A bond is to know the other's truths, experiences, joys, regrets, fears, and dreams... it is everything that makes them who they are; it is beyond anything that anyone could know or describe about themselves. There are no lies or trickery when I can read his soul like a holobook.

“It is more intimate than anyone could possibly know another person. You talk about 'knowing' a person and 'intimacy,' and your mind focuses on the exposing of our bodies. But through our bond, we have exposed ourselves to the deepest level possible. He hasn't come to know my body, but he knows my soul. He knows me better than I know myself. And I him. He has done terrible things. To you. To our friends. To his family. To the galaxy. Those are his choices that he has to live with and accept the consequences for. But I know he made those choices in spite of who he is, not because of it. I know Ben Solo, even though he chooses to pretend to be Kylo Ren. Trust me, please.”

But Finn was having none of it. “No. It’s not about you. I don’t trust him.”

Rey jumped to her feet, her anger seething. “You don't have to trust him, but trust me that I know
him better than you could ever imagine! I know he will turn. There is more to Ben than what the galaxy sees—just as there was more to you than the killing machine you were trained to be. Does he not deserve the same chance at forsaking the First Order as you were given? There is so much you don't know about Snoke and what Ben has gone through, but it is not my story to tell. Believe in me like I believe in him. Believe in me like I believed in you.”

Finn stared at her for a long moment, digesting her words. “Rey, I am trying my hardest to be understanding, and I have given you time to see what we all see. But you… you refuse to see the truth. I made my choice on Tuanul before I took a life. Kylo made his choice, too, Rey, and we have both been there to see him choose. He had a choice when Han, his own father, begged him to leave the First Order. And when he found us on Crait. And at any point up until now when you two were together. But he killed his father. He tried to kill us all – nearly succeeded with my future wife – and would have, without help from you and Luke. He is by your side in bed but not in this war. That's not telling enough for you? Look, I believe that you believe he will turn, just as you believed when you went to him on the Supremacy. But what happened, Rey? You put your life on the line; you trusted in him, and he didn't turn as you had hoped. He tried to kill us all. There was no Snoke controlling him. He chose power and hasn't made any move to give it up. At what point do you abandon this blind hope?”

Finn had quit carefully selecting his words, which had become cutting with anger, but when he started to raise his voice, he paused. Clearing his throat, he continued as steadily as he could muster. “At what point is it enough? How many people have to die for you to see that he may have these qualities that only you see, but he is still a threat to us all? At the end of the day, what his dreams or fears or memories are doesn't matter. What matters are the choices he makes, and he still makes the wrong ones. I have no doubt Ben Solo was everything you see in him, and that boy is still inside of him somewhere. But he has chosen time and time again to be Kylo Ren. You might know him, Rey, but you can't change him.”

“You're right, I can't change him, but he is doing that on his own,” she said, grasping tighter to her friend. “The darkness is not easily defeated. I know, because I struggle with it, too. He is trying. He could have killed you that night in my room. He stopped the blaster bolt that would have killed Poe. Does that mean nothing to you?”

“Kylo Ren might be evil, but he's not stupid,” he said in exasperation. “You told me yourself that he wants you to join him. He would do anything—manipulate you any way he could—to win your loyalty... and it looks like it’s working.”

Her voice was high and saccharine in mocking contempt. “Anything? Such as committing treason against the First Order? If that is what you meant, then I agree; he would do anything to win my loyalty. Including... turn.”

Finn's eyes flashed resentfully. He was listening, but was refusing to understand. “So, what is your
plan, then? Will you keep your deranged beast on a leash like Snoke did to protect the galaxy from his wrath?"

“Don't you dare speak of him like some...some...” murderous snake...creature in a mask...monster. It was all vilification she had once believed before she had been forced into their connection and eventual understanding of him. She let the retort die away, and he didn't dare finish the comment for her. He didn't apologize, but he looked abashed for his unkind words – not that it was enough to curb his anger.

“But he is those things, Rey.”

“He is not!” she spat right back, turning on her heels to leave. The others had assuredly heard them by now but were wise enough to make themselves scarce.

Finn grasped her shoulders roughly, forcing her to face him. He ducked his head so their eyes met. “What do you want from me, Rey? Do you want me to forgive him for everything he has done? Do you want me to be okay with something so wrong? Do you want me to open our doors to death itself? Because I can't. I'm not afraid anymore. I won't run away. If that... man comes for us, I will protect the people I care about. You understand that, don't you? Your friendship means the galaxy to me, but I love you. That means I'm willing to lose your friendship if it means keeping you safe.”

She blinked tears from her eyes. “You won't have to....”

“Rey, can you sit here and promise me that, no matter what happens between you two, that my fiancée and I will be safe from him? Even if you are convinced he will never hurt you, can you promise the same for us?”

The truth was, she didn't know anymore. After what happened on Kamino, he likely hated her. What would he do now? Rey knew her silence was answer enough.

“There will come a time when you have to choose between our lives and his,” he said, hands tightening on her shoulders. “Who will you choose?”

She shook her head firmly. She wouldn't do it; he was asking her the impossible. “It doesn't have to be that way. You wanted me to choose in my room that night, but I didn't, and I saved you both.”
“No, you chose him.”

“I didn't!” She pleaded for him to understand, to see it as she had, to see him as she did. “You mean so much to me. I thought you would understand that I was choosing you both. I trusted him when he promised he wouldn't hurt you. And he didn't!”

Finn sighed, mirroring her exhaustion as each refused to relinquish their beliefs. “He’s not on our side, Rey.”

“No, but he’s on mine.”

Rey saw the finality in his eyes; he would not be persuaded that Kylo was anything other than a monster. “He wants to hurt us, Rey. Yes, your begging stopped him. What happens when it doesn't? What happens if you're not there or he's angry with you? What if next time he won't listen?”

“I don't know, Finn,” she whispered through tears. “You can't ask me to choose. It's asking me to tear my heart in two.”

Finn smiled sullenly, his thoughts heavy. “Then if that time comes, you'll force me to make the decision for you. I'll be the friend you need me to be, even if you hate me.”

“I could never hate you, Finn, even if you had to...” she hiccuped a sob at the thought of where Kylo's current path would inevitably lead him. “Just promise me you'll give him a chance. All I'm asking is for him to have a choice in his fate. And please don't hate me. I just want my friend back. I'm sorry; I can't control where my heart guides me... I just... I wanted desperately to be with Ben and have the support of my family at the Resistance.” She sighed. “I should get back to help Chewie.” She turned to leave, tears abandoned on her cheek, but his hand grasped her wrist. Something had clicked into place in his mind. She watched the realization pass over his face, replaced by a new, troubled expression.

"Your heart?” he choked, his tone grim. He studied her face in silence for a moment before managing to find the strength to continue. “Can you answer something honestly, Rey?” His eyes were shifting back and forth between hers, focused intently on finding the answer he suspected was hidden within them.

She hesitated before answering, fearful of what he was searching for. "Yes, of course."
"This is... important. I know after all of this you probably don't trust me not to freak out, but I really need you to be honest with me." If his terrified expression didn't reinforce his words, the panicked urgency in his voice would have.

"I understand!"

He looked down at his feet, shuffling nervously. “What you said... when he...was it true...when you...”

“What are you talking about?” She nearly laughed, but it died in her throat when he looked up at her with heartbroken eyes. “What is it, Finn?”

“Are you in love with Kylo Ren?”

His words crashed into her like a fall through one of the star destroyers she scavenged in the Jakku desert. Her friend may have felt betrayed before, but she could feel it in his energy in the Force now. She chose her words carefully, facing the very real possibility of losing her best friend. "It doesn't matter, after what Poe did on Kamino….”

“Yes, Rey! This could change... everything. I need to know before it's too late. Do you love him?” His voice was pleading, his tone desperate.

"Please, Finn, don’t do this. I don't want to hurt you," she breathed.

"I don't want to hurt you, either. That's why I need you to answer me." He nodded in encouragement with tears in his unwavering eyes, as if the action would assist in his acceptance of the answer she would give. She stood for a moment, quietly, knowing the answer in her heart but preparing herself for his response.

"I'm not in love with Kylo Ren,” she whispered slowly, but he didn't release the breath he was holding. He must have read the truth written on her face. “I'm not in love with him, because I know that Kylo Ren isn't real. Everything Ben has done as Kylo creates conflict to his soul, because that's not who he truly is. I know you'll call it crazy...and wrong...and dangerous. And it's complicated and makes absolutely no sense. I am not in love with Kylo Ren, but, yes, I am in love with Ben Solo. I think somehow, deep within myself, I always have been.”
She smiled, despite the consequences, as if being completely honest with him was the first moment she had been able to be herself. “I love him, Finn,” she said, joy bubbling in her throat. “I love Ben. I love Ben.” She pondered the implications as she looked to her friend for a response. Kylo had forced her to stop hiding behind the persona she thought others wanted to see. Now she had the courage to allow Finn to see her – the good and the bad – as well. It was both liberating and terrifying.

Finn leaned forward on his knees and dropped his head back to his hands. He shook his head, groaning a string of curses. But he didn't yell at her or tell her she was wrong or question her sanity or ask her “why” or if she was “sure.” When he had thought it was just a physical connection, he’d tried to reason with her, but when he discovered it was love… he trusted her. He was quiet, likely furious, but he didn't take it out on her. She waited patiently for a response.

When it became clear he was at a loss for words, she spoke first. “Do you hate me?” His head shot up, his eyes wide in disbelief.

“Oh, Rey,” he whispered hoarsely, opening his arms to wrap her in his warm embrace. “How could you think... no. No! I am... unbelievably disappointed… and scared for you, but I could never hate you. You are my family. I love you; that will never change. No matter what, okay? Do I hate him? Yes. Would I rather your heart belong to anyone else in this entire galaxy? Absolutely. But I realized the moment I asked you that it's not my choice. I don't get to decide who your heart belongs to. And I can't protect you from getting it broken, either. From the moment I met you I've wanted to protect you from everything, but I realize now you never needed my protection. I can be here for you, as a best friend, as a brother, as anything you need me to be. I'll always be here for you, all right?” She nodded into his chest. “No more lies?” She smiled against him and shook her head.

“Does he know?” he asked softly. “Other than when you shouted it in front of everyone, and he called you a liar?”

“I...” she blushed. “Not yet.”

“If you want him to turn, you should probably...” he started, but thought better of it. “You know what, no. I'm not going to tell you what to do. You can tell your Supreme Leader Force boyfriend whatever you want.”

**Boyfriend?**
The term quickened her already roaring pulse. “Cute boyfriend?” she tried, hoping her friend would crack a smile. He didn't, but his face was less grave. She considered it progress.

“I should have specified 'cute boyfriend not hellbent on galactic domination.’” His words were almost joking, but there was something in his tense embrace that disquieted her. He wasn't yelling or crying or refusing to speak with her, but it felt as if there was still something wedged between them, something important that he was holding back.

“Rey?” He grasped her shoulders, peeling her off his chest. She looked up at him, but his eyes were guarded. “You say you love him, but does he love you?”

There were only two scenarios – either he loved her in return, or he didn't. Both were equally terrifying to consider.
Chapter End Notes

References to violence, torture and sexual abuse
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story is 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
As the *Silencer* broke through the dark clouds of Mustafar, Kylo scanned the landscape for signs of life, but there was nothing among the rivers of lava and valleys of scorched rock as far as the eye could see. Kylo guided his ship toward looming black towers that sprung from a cliff like the obsidian crystals they were forged from. The towers stood sentinel before an endless lake of
bubbling magma. A waterfall of lava cascaded from its base into the valley below, a thin fiery-orange river cutting through the black crust of the planet's surface, guiding him to the castle like one of the glowing strings that supposedly comprised the web of the Cosmic Force.

It was dark and foreboding. It should have terrified him. Distantly, he knew that. But the darkness surrounded him here, soothed him, called to him in ways he had never felt even under Sidious. He sensed the darkness as he never had before, because the concentration of darkness here was greater than nearly anywhere else. Luke had been right to hold him back on Malachor; he could feel the change in himself as the darkness flooded past the strong barriers of his mind. He did nothing to stop it, however, because the influence of the darkness convinced him he didn’t want to. That was the nature of the beast. All his fears, his determination to fight back, faded away as they were consumed by darkness.

The planet itself contained a dark energy that the towers focused like a conduit. It was a beacon of darkness, calling to those who held its strength in their veins. Kylo felt peace and belonging. The power that raged through his blood whispered of purpose and destiny. He never wanted to leave.

*You are greater than Darth Vader,* it told him, *You could finish what he started. You possess more power and raw strength than the Emperor’s apprentice could have ever aspired to control. You have become the master. You bow at the feet of no one. The galaxy is yours to dominate.*

After years of having only a mask of his grandfather's to guide him, the thought of what was hidden behind those obsidian walls excited him. He knew of the trophies Vader was rumored to have secured in the rooms of that castle, or perhaps in the Sith catacombs it was built upon. Kylo would take what was his—it was his birthright. The darkness would guide him; the light did not reach him here.

He had to rely entirely upon the Force to pilot his ship to the landing platform; the electromagnetic field from the gravitational pull of Mustafar's neighboring planet, Jestefed, coupled with the opposing force of its neighbor on the opposite side—Lefrani—rendered the ship's instruments useless. It was a formidable atmosphere, but to Kylo, it felt like home.

The castle was daunting, severe, and uninviting. It was built above a seemingly endless underground lake of lava, visible from even the tallest reaches of the tower. As his boots clicked on the black stone floor, creating echoes through the abandoned fortress, Kylo realized how heightened his senses felt. The Force was concentrated here.

The rooms of the castle were connected by elaborate obsidian skyways, and heavily armored blastdoors secured the necessary chambers. Kylo was easily able to open them. He wondered if the security was lax, or if he had only been able to open them because he was finally worthy enough.
The entire structure seemed to center around a large Bacta tank, still lit in a foreboding glow. He closed his eyes and searched for his grandfather's energy there, but he found nothing. He was alone. But he did sense the artifact calling him from a hidden room at the far end of the Bacta chamber.

Kylo entered the blast door with a few manipulations of the Force, walking down a dark stairwell. The air around him grew colder; he wasn't certain if it was the temperature or the darkness. Strange energies emanated from the room below, and his breathing became more noticeable through his helmet’s voice modulator. As he entered the room, he realized how extensive his grandfather's collection of trophies truly was.

There was a massive assortment of ancient texts and scrolls to the right, Ben could spend days in there, learning the knowledge of the past. There was a strange collection of gowns, robes, necklaces, crowns, rings, and amulets contained in transparent cases. Those artifacts seemed almost worshiped, though they were far from the most valuable in the room. Next to the cases were shelves of masks of varying color and shape; large, vibrantly hued crystals; intricately detailed statues; urns; and meditation chalices. On the far left wall was an assortment of weapons, including an old lightsaber. A Jedi lightsaber, by the energy emanating from it.

He picked it up, turning the hilt in his hand. The legacy saber had been destroyed in the throne room, and this saber was not his grandfather's. But if it was not his, then whose was it? Why would he keep it? Did it belong to a fallen foe? Or a friend? There wasn't a large collection of lightsabers. Despite the incredible amount of Jedi that Vader had become legendary for assassinating, there was only the one lightsaber in his collection. The person who owned that lightsaber must have been important to him.

Run, Ben! a strange voice in the Force warned. His grip faltered on the weapon, nearly dropping it. But he was distracted by a dark energy dragging at his soul with claws of ice.

His eyes scanned the room as an energy called him closer, and he was reminded why he had made the journey in the first place. The Telos holocron. The clear crystal sat upon a base of jagged, asymmetrical formations. It looked nothing like the other pyramidal, glyph-ridden holocrons of the Sith he had seen in history holobooks. Kylo turned the Sith artifact over in his hand, delaying the inevitable. It contained the teachings of nearly every significant Sith Master for thousands of years, but the gatekeepers—interactive holographic versions of the former Masters—would only answer his questions if they sensed enough darkness in him. He would be denied entry as an enemy if they sensed his light. Kylo closed his eyes and summoned the darkness around him, focusing it into the holocron, unleashing its intensity.

The artifact illuminated in his hands before a voice boomed around the room, “Kam isar tu
Tell them what you seek... a different, more haunting voice whispered in the Force.

"Force Destiny," Kylo said as strongly as he could muster. His stomach rolled as a creature appeared before him, dressed in a robe, a hood shrouding his features. Darth Sidious. There was nothing familiar in what Kylo saw of his gnarled, wrinkled face, but, somehow, he knew exactly who it was. He looked nothing like Snoke, but Sidious was still a monster of nightmares in his own right. The Master turned to look at him and began a rasping speech.

"Choose someone as a successor, and you will inevitably be succeeded. Choose someone hungrier, and you will be devoured. Choose someone quicker, and you won't dodge the blade at your back. Choose someone with more patience, and you won't block the blade at your throat. Choose someone more devious, and you'll hold the blade that kills you. Choose someone more clever, and you'll never know your end. Despite these cautions, an apprentice is essential. A Master without an apprentice is a Master of nothing," the creature paused, smiling cruelly. "I should have warned against choosing someone with more sentiment. You would have thought I had learned that lesson the first time. I underestimated you, Kylo Ren; I won't make that mistake again."

Kylo dropped the holocron on the floor, immediately severing the connection. He sighed, gently retrieving the artifact, and slipping it into a fold in his cloak. He ripped the Jedi lightsaber from his belt, ready to place it back on the shelf, when he hesitated. Channeling his rage and fear into darkness, he felt the impulse to destroy. He could bring this room of his grandfather's legacy to ruin as that legacy had done to his life. As his thumb hovered over the trigger, however, he felt a now-familiar sensation.

It had only been a few hours since his last connection with Rey, and he hadn't spared a thought for her since he landed on Mustafar. But he felt the slight tug of her energy, the Force vibrating around him announced her presence. He turned, the lightsaber still grasped in his gloved palm.

Rey shivered despite the heat radiating from the castle core. "Ben?" She was still shrouding her side of the bond to him, he noticed, as she glanced at the artifacts around them. Her attention was quickly drawn away from the room of treasures to study him, and he knew why. He knew she could sense a difference in him. He didn't care. "What happened? Where are you? Why are you wearing that mask again?"

Kylo wanted no part of the trying conversation that would deteriorate into the altercation that was an eventuality whenever they were together—she would scream at him and remind him of the terrible creature he was because he wouldn't do her bidding, then he would snap back with scathing words he didn't mean in his anger. Perhaps I would mean it this time, he thought. She betrayed me. He moved past her, studying the contents of the transparent cases. “I am where I belong.” He
didn't need to glance back at her face to know how his words had wounded her.

“What is *that* supposed to mean?” her voice wavered with superficial anger, failing to conceal the raw pain underneath. He figured she would leave soon enough. “All I can feel is darkness. Where are you?”

His temporary peace had disappeared with her arrival, the light nearly blinding him. But the darkness fed off the ache in his chest, and the pain was satisfying...addicting. This was why his grandfather had chosen this place. It was his place of failure and, therefore, pain. He thrived on the pain. Kylo could learn; he could thrive here too. He could finish what his grandfather started here. He was already greater than what his grandfather had ever aspired to be. He would fulfill the destiny of his bloodline.

“You should go.”

“Ben, don’t shut me out! Where are you?” she screamed at him. He refused to look at her. If he saw the pathetic hope on her face—the face that lied to him as she told him she loved him after admitting to her general that she had only shown him compassion at the behest of his mother. The face that claimed he would never be alone, that it wasn't too late—while planning his execution with the Resistance – he might feel the compulsion to run her through with the lightsaber in his hand. As far as he had fallen into the hole of darkness, he still didn't want to hurt her. But he would, oh, he would, if she stood in his way.

“Mustafar,” he said. A smile twitched on his face as his words sounded emotionless to his own ears. The vocoder only heightened the cold detachment in his voice. “And that's not my name.”

She slipped around him, grasping his shoulder in her hands. Despite his desire, he didn't have the strength to pull away from her touch; it was more beguiling than even the darkness that imprisoned him. “Something has happened to you. I can feel it. This isn't you. We have to go now.” She grabbed his arm and attempted to drag him from the room, but he refused to go anywhere. The darkness commanded him to stay. “Now, Ben!”

*You could hurt her. Kill her. End the connection and the light. Be free. I'll help you; just surrender to the darkness. Don't fight it; surrender to my will. She can't run from you now. Do it. Fulfill your destiny.*

“Get out!” he demanded, ripping his arm away in an attempt to distance himself from her. Had those thoughts been his? Or the darkness? They sounded terrifyingly familiar; but he couldn’t remember if he had heard those words or the voice that had spoken them before. His thoughts and
memories were hazy – there was a heavy fog that was settling in his mind. Kylo shook his head, but he couldn’t remember why he had done it. His body heaved with darkness. Something was desperately wrong. His only fear was for her. “Don't you understand? I'll kill you; get out!”

The fear in her eyes sickened him. “Ben, don’t do this.”

“Am I interrupting?” a voice hissed from the doorway.
Chapter End Notes

Dark thoughts
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Rey and Kylo both started at the intrusion. Someone stood in the darkness with them, but in the Force, he was all but invisible. A shadow... a phantom. The creature before them was tall with dark robes covering his yellow skin. Horns protruded from his bald head like a spiked crown; black tattoos were etched across his face. Darkness bled from his energy.

Her bondmate stepped forward, the darkness still plaguing his energy like a sickness, his muscles twitching in preparation for a fight. It terrified her to see him so... lost. Not on Starkiller, not in his memories, never had she seen him so entirely overwhelmed with darkness. The Force had just brought them together in his chambers, he had still been at war with himself, but she could sense his light. He had seemed close to turning, expressing his desire to destroy First Order superweapons, but this place... this place must have ensnared him in darkness he was unable to fight, because this couldn't be his own decision to succumb to it. It *couldn't.*

Could it?

Rey felt the darkness calling her, too, needling at the edges of her consciousness. Her shields against it were constructed as strong as she could manage. Only a small trickle of darkness slipped through, which she decided was a success considering the sheer amount of it.

Unfortunately, the strongest intensity of it was crashing against the bond. She didn’t want to shut him out when he needed help, but she couldn’t risk falling to darkness with him. Rey remembered what she had almost done the last time she had allowed darkness entry. Never again.

Sidious’s voice in the darkness had all but disappeared since that night inside his memories, and she had done her best to block the darkness as thoroughly as she could ever since. She reminded herself that she had to reject the darkness, no matter how strong the call, otherwise she could do nothing to prevent Kylo’s further descent into darkness. She didn’t know how to help him, but whatever she did, she knew it had to be far away from that place. She would drag him away from there kicking and screaming if she had to. And if this creature intervened – she glanced at the weapons behind her – they weren’t lightsabers, but they would have to do.

“Who in the eight Hells are you?” Kylo growled.

“Who I once was will be more of an interest to you than who I am now,” the shadow answered. “This body is just a vessel, a conduit for my true energy, though I did ask for my vessel to be
another Zabrak. You humans are too... emotional.” He paused, a cruel smile creeping across his face. “I presume you have heard of Force Destiny?”

Kylo stood terrifyingly still. “Unfortunately.”

“It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Ren. I have been waiting here for you to finish your training. We were to be introduced when you committed yourself to darkness. Your master is my master. Or he will be; he has not quite had the chance to become my master yet in this incarnation. He was my master before this body. But he will be my master again. All it will require is the item his essence was transferred to upon his death. In his case, it was a ring, engraved with the runes from the four sages of Dwartii, carved from the very stone you stand upon.”

Kylo chuckled darkly. “You're wasting your time. I was the one who killed him. I have no interest in his resurrection.”

“You merely followed the ways of the Sith—the Rule of Two—the apprentice usurping the master. Make no mistake: in my past life, I would have had no qualms in severing Sidious in two, a feat you succeeded in achieving. But death has a way of changing your priorities. Hatred and revenge are sharp tools when directed at a common enemy: the Jedi. You can be even stronger as one of us.”

“Us... you were brought back with Force Destiny,” Kylo said quietly, more of a statement than a question. Rey knew, even in darkness, he was struggling with the implications as strongly as she was. She hadn't lost him yet. “Is the other machine here? Are there others... like you?”

“There will be,” the Zabrak promised. “I was the only one he was able to... awaken... and train before his untimely... dismemberment. Once Force Destiny has restored him to a stronger form, he will create his Dark Army. We will have the power of everyone from Bane and Revan to Tyranus and Dooku.” Rey's heart sank at his words. The Resistance had no idea what they would be up against. They struggled against “Snoke,” Kylo, and their army of stormtroopers; what could they do against an army of dark lords?

Kylo did not seem to share her fear. “What about my grandfather?”

“Vader was weak,” the phantom hissed. “He died in the light, granted immortality in the Force. There is no object imbued with his essence; that is strictly a dark side... punishment. Your grandfather would have no place in Sidious's army. His hatred and desire for revenge were too short-sighted. His sentiment was pathetic.” There was a split second of relief when Rey believed that maybe, just maybe, Kylo would see that his grandfather wasn't who he had been told he was.
Kylo stood silent, apoplectic, but it was what she sensed in his silence that concerned her. She couldn't catch his exact thoughts, but she knew they were dark—and focused on the promise of power.

_You_, she remembered from the interrogation room. **You're afraid. That you'll never be as strong as Darth Vader.** She had presumed that in his desire for his grandfather's strength, he had wanted to be him. But she understood in that moment she was wrong. He didn't want to _be_ his grandfather, he had already become more powerful than Vader ever was. Kylo now desired a power _greater_ than anyone had ever possessed. If he was part of a dark army, he would have the strength of the others to conquer the galaxy and gain the power he had always wanted. Not that his reasoning mattered; what mattered was that he was considering the monster's offer.

_No, Ben, please don't do this. Your grandfather was not weak. He loved his son. He gave his life to save him, just as your father did for you!_

Kylo did not even flinch at her plea, instead, his attention focused entirely on the shadow before them, as if she were _nothing_. As she stood there, helpless to save him, she wondered if perhaps she _was_ nothing to that war, as he had once told her in a burning throne room. Neither man before her felt the need to acknowledge her, despite her connection to the Resistance. She was not considered a threat. And all she had been to the Resistance was a pawn to trap their enemy. They even aligned themselves with a cartel that would actively try to kill her. She was a nobody to all of them.

Perhaps it was an advantage. By refusing to acknowledge her presence, they underestimated her. It would be that creature’s fatal mistake, because she would kill him before she allowed him to take Kylo away from her.

“Who are you?” Kylo asked the menacing creature.

“I am no one now,” he replied. “But once... once, I was great. I could have been even greater. I went by the name... Maul. Darth Maul.” Though the name meant nothing to her, there was a flinch of recognition in Kylo.

Kylo's posture remained defensive, and, in that, Rey found hope. “What do you want from me?”

The creature smiled again, licking his lips predatorily. “Join us. We are more powerful together than we could ever be alone. Unite against a common enemy until the galaxy is ours.”
There was a dangerous edge to Kylo's voice when he spoke again. “The galaxy is already mine.”

“Not yet,” the dark lord tutted. “You may have the power to destroy the dwindling Resistance, but can you destroy an entire Dark Army?”

“Dzworokka yun; nyashquwai, nwiquwai. Wotok tsawakmidwanottoi, yuntok hyarutmidwanottoi,” Kylo growled. Rey had presumed he had learned many languages with his extensive education and travels with both Luke and Sidious, so that wasn't what concerned her when he uttered the harsh language. What concerned her was that he seemed as surprised by his words as she did.

*Two there should be; no more, no less. One to embody power, the other to crave it,* a voice whispered in the room. She studied the Zabrak to discern whether he heard it as well. If he did, he didn't react. The air in the room felt charged and heavy. Kylo shook his head as if trying to free himself from the same sensation.

*What is this place?*

A smile crept across the face of the Zabrak. “Sidious found error in the ancient ways of the Sith. The 'Rule of Two' is flawed. We have become as stagnant as the Jedi, nearly falling into extinction. We must focus on what is important—the domination of the galaxy. Through the power of many, we will gain victory. These are desperate times….”

Kylo's free hand twitched at his side, but his fingers curled into a fist rather than drawing his weapon. *He won't do it. He's giving up.* It was then that Rey noticed what the other hand was grasping. A lightsaber. With their attention focused on each other, they still hadn't paid her any mind. It was now or never.

She knew she could summon the weapon, but without a connection to it, she feared she could not control where it landed. She had pulled Finn's blaster to herself during their confrontation, but it had landed haphazardly at her feet. And, even if she could control its path, Kylo might struggle for control over the weapon again. She could not afford a misstep here.

Instead, her scavenger instincts kicked in. With no time to consider the consequences, she sprinted forward. Ducking down, she slid feet first on his right side, ripping the weapon from his grasp as she slid by. She hopped into an offensive posture, igniting the weapon so it was aimed at the creature's face.
“If you want him, you'll have to go through me.”

Kylo was a storm of conflict again, his energy in the Force was chaotic. Maul was apathetic, as though she had bowed at his feet instead of challenging him. “Very well,” he said, igniting a lightsaber that looked like her quarterstaff but with two red blades fixed to each end.

The Zabrak noticed her questioning stare and laughed. “It’s a saberstaff, girl. You should have stayed in the safety of the light where you belong.”

But that wasn't the response that concerned her. A distinct terror shivered down her spine as she heard the unmistakable crackle of an unstable lightsaber igniting behind her. Kylo’s side of the bond went dark, his barriers nearly shutting her out completely. The Force was alight with warning.

*Ben?*

She turned slowly to face him, but she knew it was not "Ben" staring back at her through the emotionless visor of his mask. His darkness howled around him, but there was no conflict. She knew if he removed the mask, his eyes would be black with darkness. He twisted the lightsaber in a lazy flourish. “I'll do it,” he said, staring past her to Maul, his deep voice calm and without conflict. “This ends now.” He proved the seriousness of his words by thrusting his lightsaber toward her midsection.

Rey jumped back as she turned, the Force warning her that Maul was still behind her. Slashing in a wide arc, she focused her attack on the Zabrak darksider. He easily evaded her strike by flipping backward, but it provided her with enough space to make a break for the entryway. The Force should have snapped her back to her side of the galaxy as she sprinted away from him. But it didn't. She made it through a room with a cylindrical Bacta tank and onto a long and—thankfully—wide elevated walkway.

She didn't need to glance behind her to know that Kylo was gaining on her, the echo of his boots growing louder. In her panic, she tried to sever the connection, but she was as firmly part of his world as if she had actually flown herself to that forsaken planet.

What was happening? Could her friends still see her on her side of the galaxy? Or, if they went searching, would they find no trace of her? If she was still there, how was she not running into something on that side of the connection? If she was only here in this place, how did it happen, and why couldn't she leave? Was the bond growing stronger? Was he somehow preventing her from going back? Or was she too conflicted to disconnect it herself? Was her desire to save him—what
she believed was his last chance—greater than her fear for her own survival? Or was there something far darker at play?

When it was clear that he would soon overtake her, Rey turned to face him. Her breath hitched as she saw him. He looked every bit the nightmare he strived to be. The orange glow of the lava below them made him look wraith-like and haunting. The glow illuminated the cracks of the helmet, almost as if light shone from within it. But Rey knew there was no light to be found there. The darkness radiating from him had turned him into the monster he had always wanted to be. She had spared his life as he slept, but if he was trying to kill her, she knew what she had to do. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she blocked his first swing.

“Ben, please!” His movements were focused and impassive. If he had any reservations about fighting her, he hid it well. It quickly became clear that this was not the man she’d fought on Starkiller. The blows were unforgiving and unrelenting, confident and dominating. Their blades met in a clash between them, the heat of his lightsaber causing sweat to mingle with the tears stinging her cheeks. The power behind the strike rattled her clenched teeth as their blades connected.

They both grunted with effort as he pushed her backward, her feet sliding on the smooth floor from his brute strength. She attempted to kick him backward, but before she connected with his abdomen, a push of Force sent her sprawling onto her back. She had to immediately roll as he was already upon her, his blade sparking into the skyway next to her head. He was not holding back this time—he was not weakened by physical and emotional wounds; he had no blind hope that he could turn her. This was the warrior she had witnessed in his memories. She had no doubt he aimed to kill her.

She jumped to her feet with a wide swing, hoping to put more space between them, but the blade sliced within centimeters of his tunic, and he didn't even pause. He continued his assault as if he were impervious to the plasma of her blade, her defensive attempts all but ignored. Or, perhaps, she realized as her blade singed his cloak, he didn't care which one of them ended the fight. Perhaps he was prepared to fall to her hand if the Force was on her side.

The Force was on her side. Rey knew every form he had ever learned after she scavenged his training from the bond on Starkiller; the movements were as natural as if she’d spent years learning them herself. The light of the Force flowed through her, becoming one with her, guiding her to where his next strike would land. And yet she was still on the defensive, struggling to hold his barrage of strikes at bay. His blade whipped through the air as fast as she could think to block it, providing her no chance at a reprieve. She had his training, but she didn't have the guidance of the darkness and its power. Adding to the odds stacked against her was that this weapon did not become an extension of herself as the one before had. Perhaps the Force’s call to her on Takodana had meant more than she thought.
Rey was not on the offensive, and she knew that was a dangerous place to be. She had seen what he had done to Jacen; she knew she had to break the succession of strikes before she made a mistake. But she was fighting him and the darkness in fear that if she allowed the darkness in, she would allow Sidious back in as well—and it was exhausting.

Kylo swung low, and she jumped and rolled back toward the trophy room. He swiped toward the inside of her right leg before immediately twisting his wrist and bringing the blade diagonally down at her upper right arm, barely missing as she twisted away. He swung high, and she ducked low, sliding behind him in an attempt to escape; because escape was all she could hope for in this fight. With his experience and aid of the darkness, this was not a fight she hoped to win.

She successfully parried several quick swings as she backed away before he lunged forward and thrust the blade toward her chest, catching her shoulder as she pivoted. She cried out as the plasma burned into her skin. He hissed as a twin pain radiated from his own shoulder, and it was enough to give him pause. He released the mechanism on his helmet and slid it from his head.

His eyes were black pools of nothingness, just as the vision had prophesied. There was nothing in them that reminded her of her bondmate. The light was gone.

Dropping his icy stare, he considered the helmet in his hand, shifting its weight in his gloved fingers. Rey saw it for what it was – a chance. He was distracted, and it provided her the briefest opening to take advantage. She knew it was the only chance she would be given to strike him down and save herself.

But the Force called to her.

*Pay attention*, it warned in a voice she recognized from dreams. *This is important.*

When he raised his eyes, there was a flash of something in his stare other than darkness. Rey lowered her weapon, trusting in her belief in the slightest chance that she could save him, because she had hope. Surrendering her fate to the will of the Force, she made what was quite possibly the most foolish decision of her life. Her thumb released the trigger, disengaging the plasma blade. His eyes never left hers as she tossed the lightsaber to his feet.

“Pick it up,” he demanded, his voice nearly unrecognizable in its brutality. He kicked the weapon toward her. It was oddly reminiscent of the medbay on the *Finalizer* when he had thrown his weapon aside, when *she* had been the one consumed by darkness, and she demanded he fight her. She only hoped this time it ended differently.
“We both know how this fight will end, Ben: one or both of us will die. Even if I could win, I don't want to,” she said, her voice as firm and strong as she could muster in the face of death. “If you wish to kill me, then do it. But I won't do this. I won't fight you. I love you.”

“Liar!” he screamed, a wave of Force knocking her off her feet. She landed roughly on the skyway, sprawled on her back. He stood above her, his entire body shaking with rage to match his unstable lightsaber. “Your lies won't save you now. You betrayed me; I will kill you.” He lowered his lightsaber until the point came to rest just under her chin.

“I would never tell anyone those words unless I meant them—you of all people should know that. You can hate me, but you can't change how I feel about you. I wish I had told you before. But I didn't tell you this to use you or in hopes you would spare me. I told you so you'd know the truth before you take my life. Even if you run this lightsaber through my heart, I will still love you...”

...just like your father.

As if he heard her thought, his eyes darkened further...if that were possible. She lowered her barriers completely, allowing her true feelings for him to overwhelm the bond. His intense eyes locked onto hers, both frozen in place, the only sound the heavy rasping of their breathing.

He could shut himself from the bond if he desired, but she knew he couldn't deny the truth he found in her eyes. Neither could she deny the war she found in his. Even if he believed her, he held the weapon steady. Her thoughts lingered on the last time someone he loved confronted him on a skyway. She had such hope in the seconds before he thrust that lightsaber through his father. And now, he was preparing to do it again. Maybe love wasn't enough; maybe it never would be. Maybe she was wrong; maybe it was too late.

“Close your eyes,” he said, and Rey’s heart clenched with finality. She knew what he intended to do. Another memory flashed in her mind of a young red-headed woman whose life was taken on a stormy night at a Jedi temple. Tionne had known what he would do if she did, but she had complied, and her last thoughts were of him. Rey had no doubt hers would be as well. Part of her wanted to close her eyes, so the darkness in the eyes of the man she loved—her murderer—wouldn’t be the last image she would ever see. But that would be too easy.

“No,” she challenged, holding his stare. “If you’re going to kill me, then the least you can do is look me in the eyes when you do it.” She would face him as she had in the throne room, but this time he was not protecting her from the monster. This time he had become the monster. He could save her from everyone else, but could he save her from himself?
She did not plead for his mercy; she did not appeal to his vanity. She only held his stare, not in anger or fear, but sympathy. It was not her death she mourned, but his. The last of Ben Solo would fall with her, and Kylo Ren would be forever lost to darkness—not that his forever would be very long. One day, soon, one of his enemies would successfully bring an end to Kylo Ren, and he would join her in the afterlife. Death would only be painful for a moment, she assured herself. Then she could join the Force, finding the belonging in eternity that she could never find in life.

His eyes—oh, his eyes—even as he stared down at her with pools of darkness, her life in his hands, their magnetism drew her in. She found a small comfort that they would be the last thing she would see. What will this do to him? Force, please, even if he takes my life, help him. Save him. He shook his head before a single tear traced the scar down his cheek. A shuddered breath and a vibration in the Force were the only warnings she had before he made his decision. Her eyes fell to his hand, watching as he dropped the mask over the side of the skyway.

He stood watching its descent for a few seconds before springing into action, pulling the blade away from her chin rather than pushing through. He pivoted away from her, swinging the weapon in a vertical arc until it clashed with a glowing red blade behind him. Darth Maul's blade, she realized. The blades hissed as they fought for leverage, Kylo groaned through clenched teeth as he... fought Maul? What was happening? Why had he turned against the other darksider? Rey was too dizzy from holding a breath she hadn't realized she was holding to comprehend the events unfolding before her. Her ears rang as she blinked away the spots in her vision. She felt frozen in place by the sudden change in circumstances.

“I'll forgive your foolish misstep, Ren, but only this once, so consider the consequences carefully,” Maul growled, “Let me remind you that you are but one mortal man. Just a child. You cannot defeat an army alone.” Kylo's only response was to spin in a quick arc, abandoning his struggle to drive his weapon into Maul's left shoulder to attack his unguarded right shoulder instead. Maul was faster, however. He effortlessly blocked Kylo's swing with one end of his weapon while pivoting the other end to strike her bondmate on the left side.

Rey gasped as her own side burned in pain. She ignored the desire to check herself for a wound, refusing to tear her eyes away from the scene unfolding before her. It quickly became evident that it was a swift correction rather than a deep penetrating wound. It seemed more of a surprise to Kylo than anything else.

His emotions trickling through the bond, coupled with her pain, made her realize that the barriers on his side of the bond had slipped slightly. It was enough to know he was a raging tempest of emotion. She would accept that over nothingness. There was something else she felt over the bond: a disturbingly familiar darkness that shouldn’t have been there.
Rey still hadn't grasped why her bondmate had turned on the darksider, but one thing was clear—Maul had given Kylo a silent warning. The master of the Knights of Ren may have excelled at lightsaber combat, but he had never trained against the type of weapon Maul possessed. With that one sharp movement, Maul made it apparent that he was quite proficient with it, but Kylo did not heed his warning—either out of stubbornness, pride, or necessity. Probably a combination of all three, Rey decided.

Instead, he swung wide at Maul's midsection in a warning of his own. When the dark lord jumped back, Kylo exploited the opportunity to pummel a closed fist into his shallow wound, reminiscent of his bizarre behavior on Starkiller. She felt the darkness flood his side of the bond and she realized the masochistic effort was less intimidation and more functionality.

Maul waited patiently for Kylo to make a move, and her bondmate did not disappoint. He threw his entire weight behind each swing, forcing the Zabrak to backpedal away from the attack. Rey was suddenly struck with the sense that it was almost... too easy. Maul was not panicking; his movements were methodical, calm. Rey came to a terrifying realization – he was on the defensive because he wanted to be.

He was biding his time, analyzing Kylo's fighting style, preparing a counterattack that Kylo could not defend. Kylo had been extensively trained in both light and dark fighting stances; he had years of training, but Kylo didn’t have the patience or emotional stability to use them as effectively as he could in a fight. Kylo's strength in combat rested in overwhelming his opponent with his powerful, unrelenting swings. There was no doubt it was effective; it was exhausting to fight him. He would be heavily favored in a quick fight. Maul, however, was extending the fight, patiently waiting for Kylo to tire himself out. Once the Knight of Ren lost the power behind his swings, the Zabrak would stun him with a series of swift and agile attacks.

Though Rey had done it inadvertently, it was how she had defeated him on Starkiller. Kylo was in mortal danger, and he didn't even realize it in his darkness. Maul was confident, because he knew he would win. They were moving away from her; it was her chance to escape, but, even if he threatened her life, she had made Kylo a promise: he would never be alone. She intended to keep it.

Rey had already lost them in the darkness; she could only see the crimson blur of their lightsabers. It was impossible to ascertain much from the fight at the growing distance. All she knew was they were both standing, and that was all that mattered. As her dizziness cleared, she pushed herself up off the elevated walkway, collecting the discarded lightsaber in the process. It was strange holding the weapon without a connection to it.
The only two lightsabers she had ever touched belonged to Luke—no—Anakin and Kylo, and she had felt an instantaneous bond to both of them, both calling to her because of her connection to her bondmate. This one was as closed off to her as any other weapon. She could feel its powerful connection to the light—where Anakin’s and Kylo’s appealed to the darkness and the light within her, she sensed almost no darkness in this crystal. It was the lightsaber of a true Jedi of the past, she supposed.

Perhaps the Skywalker line inherited too much darkness ever to give themselves fully to the light—not that she didn't have the same propensity for darkness. Perhaps that was why Luke and Kylo both insisted that the Jedi order had to end. Perhaps it belonged in the past as much as the lightsaber she held in her fingers. She did wonder who its owner had been, how he or she was connected to Anakin Skywalker, or what stories it could tell. It had been important to someone once, and her heart clenched at the thought. It was all that was left of someone, and she didn't even know their name.

Her thoughts revolving around the lightsaber were abandoned as she came upon them. The light from the lava pool at the bottom of the vast cavern below illuminated their features in red, transforming them into monsters instead of men. Triggering the lightsaber, she exhaled slowly, making her decision. As she neared, she could make out their two dark forms, and it became clear that Maul’s patience had run out. She had never seen a lightsaber technique that was quite so... acrobatic.

The dark lord was spinning the dual blades with one hand in a dizzying attack. That, paired with constant Force pushes and martial arts kicks—which Rey expected more from hand-to-hand combat—left Kylo barely able to defend himself. His strikes had lost their strength and power, because he was forced to wield the weapon one-handed, using his other to block Maul's Force attacks.

The Zabrak was jumping, flipping, and spinning in a way that made Rey hesitate. She waited until Maul’s back was turned before joining the melee. The darksider easily block her swing, but it allowed Kylo to resume an offensive attack.

Rey found that teaming up against an opponent with someone who still might kill her proved more difficult than anticipated. She had to calculate her strikes to ensure she didn’t accidentally hit Kylo, while simultaneously ensuring she didn’t turn her back on him. She was encouraged that he had plenty of opportunities to make an attempt at her life but remained focused on the Zabrak. She was not, however, disillusioned this time. She knew that the unspoken peace between them was temporary. He could very well kill her after their opponent fell. For now, she had to focus on the fight at hand.

Maul clearly had extensive training with his weapon. He was able to fight off both fronts of their attack while spinning his saberstaff in one hand, finding every opportunity to knock them off
balance with a Force push through the other. The skyway was wide, but not wide enough. Rey nearly fell over the side after one such push, her eyes focusing on the pool of lava at the bottom of the towering fortress as she teetered on the edge. Skyways connecting lower levels far below them would be the only chance to stop their fall. That is, if the fall onto the hard stone from heights well over fifty meters didn't kill them first.

The vast cavern of churning liquid fire looked like the entrance to Hell itself. And, if the whispers and heavy concentration of darkness were any indication, perhaps it was. Perhaps the castle had been constructed here with a purpose, to channel the great convergence of darkness. Perhaps the darkness here was intended to be too strong to fight. Perhaps Kylo had been under its influence when he tried to kill her; or the darkness allowed other, more sinister darkness in. If that were true—if this place contained an overpowering amount of darkness—then she could help him escape this place. He could still be saved.

Maul kicked Kylo square in the eye. A cut near his brow released a steady stream of blood that followed his scar down his cheek. The Zabrak went after her next. She blocked and parried the best she could, but he surprised her with a kick to the head. Rey swayed on her feet from the force of the kick, shadows clouding the periphery of her vision. Thankfully her bondmate favored combining lightsaber forms with hand-to-hand combat as well. He responded by smashing his fist into the Zabrak's face, thankfully drawing his attention away from her. Kylo’s next lightsaber swing caught Maul's outstretched palm, severing the hand in half. Maul did not even flinch, however, before propelling another Force push at Kylo.

That one hit its mark.

Kylo had not yet completed his swing, so the push caught him off-guard and off-balance. Panic shuddered through the bond along with a spike in the Force, but whatever he attempted to do to prevent his fall was unsuccessful. Before Rey could so much as blink, her bondmate had disappeared over the edge into the abyss below.

“No!” she screamed, the echo reminding her of the last person she’d lost on a skyway. She reached out instinctively to pull him back to her, but his lightsaber snapped to her hand from the darkness instead. She stepped toward the edge, shivering with trepidation. Her hope that he had been able to grasp the edge disappeared as she found no sign of him in the void below.

Ben!

His side of the bond faded to darkness. There was a rustling of robes behind her, reminding her that she didn't have time to imagine what had befallen her bondmate. Slowly turning to face Maul, she swallowed her fear and her sobs, triggering Kylo’s lightsaber. This only concerned survival now, and Rey knew all about survival.
The Zabrak was pacing, his lips curled into a cruel sneer. “His death was in vain,” he said impassively. Rey bared her teeth and readied both weapons into a fighting stance. “Don't damn yourself to the same fate. Sidious will have his army. I feel your darkness. You fight it, but the light is your greatest weakness. Embrace it, join us, and you will have everything you've ever wanted.”

“He was all I ever wanted!” Rey shouted. Her hold over the darkness was slipping. “You took him from me! The darkness has only ever taken him from me....” Her voice had faded to a whisper, but she didn't allow a single tear to fall. She would not allow him to have that.

The monster stopped pacing, his wicked smile widening. “Interesting,” he said, circling her predatorily. “He threatened to kill you. He nearly did. And yet... Who was he to you, dark Jedi?”

Her eyes followed him as he circled her, her body rigid to prevent her resolve from crumbling under the weight of the grief she kept at bay, “Ben Solo.”

The laugh—if she could call something without an ounce of mirth, something so evil it could have escaped from the depths of Hell itself, a laugh—chilled her to the bone. Perhaps Hell was below them, and this monster had crawled out of its depths. If that were the case, she would be more than obliged to send him back. “The boy was as sentimental as his grandfather. Pity. Such potential. But you're wrong about the darkness. It was the darkness that created Force Destiny, and if you join us, the darkness could bring him back to you.”

She hesitated. Only for a moment she hesitated, as she had in the throne room the last time she was asked by a dark lord to abandon her integrity for her heart. She couldn't join them. She knew she couldn't. No matter what happened to Kylo, her desires were less important than the fate of the galaxy.

So she finally allowed the darkness in, filling her chest with a soothing cold.

The blue-hued blade hummed in her left hand, illuminating half of her form. The other half was cast in the crimson glow of the crackling blade in her right hand. As the darkness took control of her body, she had no doubt she would kill him.

The darkness devoured her anger—anger at Kylo for not fighting harder against its control, anger at Maul for what he did to Kylo, anger at herself for not stopping it—and the words that escaped her lips were decidedly cold and emotionless when she spoke. “I will kill you.”
“You can try,” he said, dark humor staining his voice. “Just as you try to be like the man whose lightsaber you hold in your left hand, but we both know you are more like the man whose lightsaber you hold in your right. It terrifies you, doesn't it? You fear becoming him.”

“I don't care,” she spat. “Not anymore.”

Yes... That voice —Sidious—whispered in her head. With the darkness, it had found its way in again. Give in to the darkness. Kill him. She ignored the voice, refusing to contemplate the consequences.

“You should care,” Maul goaded. “You speak vengeful words for a Jedi. You succeed... you fall to darkness. You fail... you fall to me. And you will fail. You hold lightsabers belonging to men of two of the most infamous Jedi bloodlines—Skywalker and Kenobi, but you know nothing of their legacies.” As the Zabrak spoke, he circled her, meticulously watching her movements. She knew if she faltered, his blade would be there to exploit it. “I knew the man who carried the lightsaber in your left hand. Kenobi. I respected him as an opponent. I would have been honored to take his life. Regretfully, that honor belonged to the “Chosen One” – the man responsible for the bloodline connected to the lightsaber in your right hand. Who are you to wield those legacies?”

When Rey had begun her journey, she had yearned to be connected to powerful legacies like the lightsabers she held in her hands. She would have given anything to be a Kenobi, or a Skywalker like her bondmate. Meeting the legendary Luke and learning to understand Kylo, however, reminded her that they were just as human as the rest of them. She didn’t need a powerful name to do powerful things. She didn’t have a legacy, but she wasn’t overshadowed by one either. She didn’t have a legacy, but she could create her own. She was strong despite her parents, and Maul would soon discover how dangerous that could be. “I faced him like this once – Kenobi,” he continued. “It was the first time I faced him. He was young and undisciplined like you. He didn’t share your temper, but I still provoked his darkness. It is proof that the true flaw of the Jedi is their underestimation of humanity. When they deny their true selves, it is an inevitability that they will break. It just takes the right incentive. Revenge is not the Jedi way, but I saw it in his eyes as I see it in yours. I killed his master. I severed their bond. He took up the dead Jedi’s weapon as well, but you will fail where he succeeded. You... are a little girl. You are a nobody pretending to be someone important. You can play hero, but it doesn't make you one.”

“I. Am Not. A Nobody!” she screamed, reversing the hilts in her hands so the blades functioned more like a saberstaff. She circled the dark lord, teeth bared, jaw clenched, waiting for him to make the first move. Maul growled in contempt and thrust his weapon forward, but she quickly blocked it with one lightsaber. She stabbed the other blade forward and caught him in the shoulder. There was a flash of uncertainty in his eyes, and a twitch of a smile on her lips. If he could bleed, he was mortal. If he was mortal, she could kill him. She could win, she convinced herself. She would.
Maul continued with his combined assault—lightsaber, Force pushes and martial arts. His movements were still swift and effective, but a second lightsaber left her less overwhelmed. She used Kylo's lightsaber for offensive strikes and the blue—which Maul claimed belonged to someone named Kenobi—as a defense against both his precise swings and his crippling kicks.

The name Kenobi sounded distantly familiar. She remembered Leia mentioning a Ben Kenobi, her bondmate's namesake. He was Anakin's master and close friend, and she remembered Leia telling a story of how Vader had killed him and he had become Luke's close confidant in death. Could Vader have kept his friend and Master's lightsaber all those years? Was Kylo more like his grandfather than he thought? Not the dark monster, but the true Anakin Skywalker?

Leia had mentioned that Kenobi had been the one to tell Luke the story of Anakin Skywalker, which Rey assumed made this Kenobi capable of conversing with the living as Luke could. If Luke was unwilling to help her, perhaps Ben Kenobi would.

*Please,* she begged the man connected to the lightsaber. *Please help me defeat this monster.*

She waited for a change in the Force or a whisper in her mind like Sidious, but she was as alone as she had been before. She swallowed her disappointment. Rey had survived her entire life alone; she could survive this alone, too. With trust in the Force, she focused, surrendering herself to its guidance—a task made difficult by the amount of darkness barreling through her veins.

Even with the power of the darkness, Maul's strength in the dark far surpassed hers, and the fight was turning his way. Maul was too skilled, too quick for her to take command of the battle. She would fight until she had nothing left, but even with the assistance of the Force, she could feel her body tiring. Maul shoved the left side of his lightsaber toward her throat, which she was able to block with both blades. She strained against his strength as he pushed the lightsabers closer to her face.

*Now, Rey,* a strange voice warned. *It has to be now.*

Rey surrendered herself to the guidance of the Force. Using Kenobi's lightsaber to hold off Maul's attack, she swung Kylo's lightsaber wide and arced it toward the Zabrak's chest. He pivoted, so the wound was shallow, but the blade met with the hilt of his saberstaff and sliced through a weak point where it looked as if it had been welded together. It severed the internal mechanism for one of the emitter shrouds. He quickly abandoned the broken half of the saber, spinning the remaining blade in quick flourishes to intimidate her.

Rey was not afraid. With two blades, she now had the upper hand. He thrust forward, but she
parried with one lightsaber, using the other to counter his attack. He was forced to spin the hilt quickly to prevent her from impaling him. Then he tried a cross body slice, but she blocked it with one blade while swinging wide with the other, forcing him to jump back. With her ability to both strike and block, he had to abandon the offensive kicks and acrobatics in favor of protecting himself from her attacks. He would make a mistake; she was certain of it, and her blade would be there when he did.

He lifted his weapon high above his head and brought it down upon her. She blocked it with a clash, the two red sabers sparking between them. The lateral vents burned in close proximity to her skin, and it was then that she realized how she could win. She thrust the lightsaber upward, hooking the vent on his blade, as she had seen Kylo do before. Once she had control of the saber, she brought the other blade across her body, severing his outstretched right arm at the elbow. She used Kylo's lightsaber to tear the arm away, sending the hand and saber away into the void. With his other hand missing three fingers, he let them go.

She expected him to stagger in shock, yell, attempt to flee, disappear into black smoke... but she was immediately met by a wall of Force. It sent her sprawling backward onto the elevated walkway, Kenobi's lightsaber clattering from her hand. She was forced to roll away from another wave of Force instead of grasping for the lightsaber. Her chest tightened in regret as it rolled over the edge into the yawning abyss below.

Maul’s blood dripped rhythmically onto the obsidian surface as he approached. She jumped to her feet, swinging Kylo's lightsaber in a wide flourish to keep distance between them. The Zabrak was weaponless, but that didn't make him any less dangerous.

There was a quick warning in the Force. Rey dropped to her stomach on the skyway as a blast of Force rocketed over her head. She extended her arm, slashing wildly with the lightsaber. She caught his right leg, severing it at the ankle. He dropped to his knee as an explosion shuddered through the castle.

*His Force blast... it must have hit something.*

She waited for the tremor to subside, but it only grew stronger. The warning in the Force was all she needed to know that, whatever the blast hit, it was critical.

Rey stood, breathing heavily with adrenaline surging through her veins. Towering over the fallen creature, she stared down at him as a menacing grin spread across his face, daring her to strike him down.
*Kill him...* the voice of Sidious whispered in her mind.

She hesitated for a moment. Was the desire to take his life the darkness in her? Was it this place? Would she regret it, as she would have if she had listened the night she held this blade to a different throat? Was his life even hers to take? She saw it in her mind: she could walk away, leaving Maul to slowly bleed out or be crushed by the castle that was fracturing around them. She could leave his fate to be determined by the Force, as she had done for Kylo on Starkiller and the *Supremacy*.

*Oh, Ben.*

His side of the bond was dark, causing a sickening ache to twist behind her ribs, stealing her breath. At first, she thought Maul had decided to strangle her through the Force as a last-ditch effort, but she should have known he wasn't going to make it easy for her. No, her struggle was entirely her own. He was not a threat to her anymore. She could walk away... but she wouldn't. Not after what Maul had taken away from her. Kylo had warned her about taking a life in the name of revenge; that it was the path to becoming him…but he wasn't here to stop her. She knew it was not the Jedi way, but she didn't care.

“If you...” Maul began, but she refused to listen to another moment of cruelty. She knew it was the darkness inside her, but she didn't care that she was crossing a line which she could never return. Without hesitation, she thrust the lightsaber through his abdomen with a feral snarl.

That was for the galaxy, she decided.

As she roughly removed the blade, the monster did not utter a single groan of pain. As he tracked her movements, he didn't say a word. As she pressed the burning blade to his chest, he didn’t flinch. He had accepted his fate. She drove the blade through him, and his lungs wheezed involuntarily as she ripped it back.

That was for Ben.

She hiccupped a sob as the skyway shuddered underneath her feet. His eyes were already dimming, but she could see the curiosity in them. He had underestimated her, he understood that now, and he would pay with his life. The plasma illuminated his face in a crimson glow as she lowered the lightsaber to his neck.

Rey didn’t have to kill him, but this – this was for her. She would show him that she was *not* a
nobody. “I am Rey,” she growled, “and you will remember my name.”

With a quick roll of her wrist, she separated the monster's head from his body. She nudged them both over the edge with her foot, watching them fall into the cavern of lava. Rey disengaged the lightsaber and clipped it to her belt. She was alone, trapped on this world by their bond and... why hadn't she been thrust back to her side of the galaxy when he fell? If he was gone, then shouldn't the bond be gone as well? A loud crack echoed through the fortress as a thin piece of the tower fell away into the void. Rey knew then; the collapse of the castle was imminent.

The Force, however, was not guiding her to run. She felt compelled to follow the column of light that pierced through the fracture in the obsidian ceiling into the darkness below. She stared over the edge, knowing immediately what she was searching for, and far below her feet she saw a patch of red against the solid black of a skyway illuminated by the light. Whatever she saw wasn't moving, but hope swelled in her chest.

_It has to be Ben's cape. It just has to. He could have been knocked out when he fell._

She refused to consider the alternative—that a fall from that height was likely fatal. The walls were crumbling down around them, but she wouldn't leave him. She would save him or die trying.

Quickly searching the layout of the castle, she tried to find a way down to him. The Force intervened, as it was wont to do. A chunk of the ceiling the size of a TIE fighter broke free, plummeting into the vast cavern. It collided with the elevated walkway she stood upon, and, suddenly, Rey was falling too. She tried to gain her bearings, perhaps find a ledge to grasp onto, but she was tumbling violently.

The orange from the light breaking through the cracks in the towers and the orange from the lava below blended together until she didn't know which way was up. Soon orange filled her vision, and the only sounds she could hear were the buffeting sounds of the wind tearing at her clothes and the crashing of her heart in her ears. Was she screaming? She couldn't tell. Her stomach was in her throat, the intense heat from the lava prickling her skin. Her hands clawed for purchase, but she grasped nothing.

Until it all stopped. She blinked away the tears in her eyes in confusion. She wasn't dead. The tower was still crumbling away above her, so she must be facing up. She was no longer falling, but she knew she had not reached the lava pool. Trying to raise her head, she realized she couldn't move. Anything. It felt like it had on the forests of Takodana, or the passenger compartment of his command shuttle when Kylo...
A shadow blocked out the light above her. There was a skyway to her right, she realized; and a person was lying flat on his stomach, reaching for her outstretched hand. A large, warm hand wrapped around hers, and she knew. The paralysis disappeared, but the hand was steadfast, assisting her over the edge of the skyway and onto the safety of the solid platform.

“Ben!”

He was on knees before her, bruised and bloody, but otherwise unscathed. His magnetic eyes studied her, and she studied them for a clue to his emotional state. He was silent. She mirrored his posture, waiting for... something to happen. Nothing did. She decided on a peace offering. *If he still wanted to kill me, he wouldn't have saved me,* she reasoned. She unhooked his lightsaber from her belt. Kylo grimaced, lowering his eyes and bowing his head.

She offered him the weapon in her outstretched hand, but he refused to look at her. He leaned forward on his hands, his hair falling forward into his eyes. Rey could feel the war inside him struggling to fight off the profound darkness. He was shaking, his emotions spiraling around them in the Force, which could be a hindrance in their imminent escape. “Ben...”

“Just do it, Rey,” he whispered, echoing words he had told her the last time her fingers were wrapped around the hilt of his lightsaber. *Do what?* The skyway trembled beneath their knees as another section of the tower fell. They were running out of time. Ben didn’t move, as if he was still waiting for something. She extended the weapon farther.

“Just take it,” she said, glancing nervously at the destruction around them.

His eyes flashed to hers.

She could feel the hatred rolling off him in waves. “Why?”

Her heart clenched as she prepared herself for him to break it. “I’m sorry, okay? Poe locked me up and was going to use me as bait for an ambush! I thought the vial was the only way he would trust me! I didn’t know he would use it! I thought I had time to warn you!”

“What are you... You think I still care about *clones*?” he scoffed. “I almost killed you!” His voice cracked as he glanced away. She was wrong. He didn’t hate her; he hated himself. When he spoke again, his voice was heartbreaking soft. “I thought... I thought you were going to use that against me. I would have deserved it.”
How could you think that?

Rey leaned forward, pressing her forehead to his. He flinched, but didn’t pull away. Remembering how Jacen and Dev had helped him calm his emotions in his memories, remembering the effect his light had on her, she searched for the light within her. His body tensed as she forced away the darkness clouding her mind. As her darkness dissipated, the light bloomed brightly inside her. That light overflowed into the bond, and the warmth flowed freely between them. She wished she knew how to push the light into him, but for the moment, the darkness was fading. Though she knew his darkness was too deep to fight on her own, she would do everything she could to help him in the limited time they had. Rey broke her connection to the light as his shaking quieted, then pulled away to study his eyes. “It’s okay. You won. You beat the darkness, Ben.”

“No!” Kylo pulled away from her. The barriers he had built up against her slipped, and waves of remorse, fear, and shame crashed upon her. Though he was withdrawing in upon himself again, the light had pierced through the darkness. She only hoped it was enough to reach Ben Solo. “I didn’t win,” he rasped. “Nothing is stopping Sidious from controlling me again, and next time, I could kill you. As long as I am alive, I’m destined to become just like my grandfather. I won’t do it, Rey. I won’t kill you.”

Shoving the weapon into his hands, she stood. “No, you’re not like him. When your grandfather was here, he let the darkness win; you did not.” She extended her open palm, but he only stared at her. “Come on, stand up. The castle is coming down. We have to go.” Differing emotions fought for dominance in Kylo’s eyes, something close to hope and awe, before he stared beyond her toward their escape. She felt a flash of fear in the bond, then determination. He had made another decision. Something told her she wouldn't like this one, either, but, wisely, he nodded once in acquiescence. The tension in his arm softened as his defiance faded. He stood. With his hand still grasped in hers, they sprinted down the skywalk.

The vibration of their boots thudding against the obsidian was masked by the violent tremors through the castle, making the Force a jumbled mess of over-stimulated feedback. However, they didn’t need the Force to know the critical situation they found themselves in. The towers were coming down in pieces around them, and it was a race against time to make it back to his ship before the castle collapsed. His arm jerked her to a stop as a boulder-sized piece of debris hit the skyway in front of them, fracturing it.

“We won’t make it,” he said, the words almost lost in the sharp cracking of the crumbling fortress. She stopped to scan the layout of the castle for another way out. They both knew there was only one way out, and that was another fifty meters completely exposed to the falling debris.

“We have to try!” Wrapping her fingers around his wrist again, she turned her attention back to
their escape, daring him to challenge her. Rey couldn’t tell if the skyway was tilting, or even the castle, or perhaps the kick to the head had done more damage than she thought, but she felt as if they would slide right off the obsidian under their feet. Her muscles screamed at her to stop, but the adrenaline carried her forward.

The shuddering of the skyway intensified, and, no matter how far they ran, they seemed no closer to safety. They had both been lucky enough that none of the pieces had fallen upon them or the skyway. In fact, though she could hear the castle crumbling around them, and feel it underneath her feet, she hadn't seen a single fragment fall into the cavern below them since the near-miss. She chanced a glance upward, knowing instinctively what she would find.

Rey faltered, nearly stumbling over her own feet, as she saw just what was hovering precariously above them. Like the acid rain in the jungle that Kylo had suspended with the Force, broken pieces of the castle loomed over their heads in stasis. Some chunks were large enough to collapse the entire skyway, and there was nothing below them to impede their descent into the lava.

Rey could see it then: his straining breaths, the rigidity of his muscles, the trembling in his knees. The weight he struggled to bear was too great to carry alone. He was right, he simply did not have the energy to both prevent the entire tower from collapsing and cover the distance required to escape in time. He needed help. Rey swiftly accessed his memories in the bond, searching for his knowledge of telekinetic halts. If she wanted him to trust her, she knew she couldn't use the bond like that anymore, but it was an emergency.

We will make it out of this, and I will ask him to teach me.

Reaching upward, she grasped onto the objects, gritting her teeth under the oppressive weight. His shoulders relaxed slightly, grateful for the lessening of his burden, though he would never admit it. The thunderous fracturing of the towers was deafening, but it encouraged them forward across the skyway. Each step took considerable effort, the weight of holding the debris in stasis draining, impeding their progress as if they were walking through a sandstorm.

Once they made it safely into the stairwell, Rey realized the extent of the damage to the castle. What had once been the stairwell had collapsed into an impossibly high tower of debris. They were weakening as they held the remnants of the castle ceiling together, and the only way out was up. With a sigh, she took a running start to jump up onto the first fragment, pulling herself onto a small ledge. Then she turned to her bondmate. His silence was disquieting. He was pensive, staring at her with an unreadable expression. She steeled herself for another battle of wills.

Kylo looked behind him, and she could feel his conflict. She wondered if, in some misguided sense of contrition, he was considering staying behind, falling with his grandfather's fortress. It was a befitting, seemingly poetic end for the heir to Lord Vader, but not the grandson of Anakin.
Skywalker. Kylo Ren could die all he wanted here, but Ben Solo was coming with her.

“We can do this,” she said, offering him her hand. “It’s just like climbing a Star Destroyer.”

Trust me.

Kylo seemed more focused on her hand than her assurances, but it was progress. She crouched low in her position on the stone ledge, stretching as far as she could reach with an open palm. He stepped forward, his eyes never wavering from his intense scrutiny of the bare skin of her hand as he used his teeth to bare his own, dropping his gloves to the floor. When he placed his much larger hands into hers with trembling fingers, she expected to be catapulted into another vision. Time hesitated, but not for an illusion of the future. The castle, the fear, the weakness in her limbs melted away as her entire existence became the shining brown irises that found hers in the darkness. There was something in them—something soft—that was entirely incongruous to their dire situation.

She braced herself to counterbalance his substantial mass as he climbed, but he used his other arm and legs to bear the majority of his weight. His hand in hers only served to hinder his climb, but his grasp remained tight, willing to follow her, it seemed, as long as they were connected. It added another challenge to her own climb, but Rey refused to let go.

Kylo followed her up the first fragment without protest, then the second, as they made a desperate push for freedom. She was quicker, more agile after years of scavenging; but what he lacked in finesse, he made up for with brute strength—and a considerable height advantage—keeping pace as best he could. When he lost his footing, she helped him regain his balance. When she slipped, he was there to catch her. She had climbed ruins thousands of times, but she'd never once had someone there to rely on, to support her, to catch her if she fell. They were in the middle of a crumbling fortress with lava below them, yet she had never felt so safe.

When the freedom of the dark, hazy skies of Mustafar was within reach, Kylo pushed Rey through a crack in the wall large enough to fit through. Never releasing his hand, she pulled him through to the safety of the solid ground outside. Glistening in sweat and covered in ash, they both collapsed to their knees, releasing their hold on the castle. With nothing left to support it, the tower immediately collapsed in a freefall into the lake of lava a hundred meters below.

There was a sharp ache across the bond as it fell, burying all its treasures and secrets with it. She squeezed his hand in empathy, and his eyes rose to hers. He mirrored her exhaustion with panting breaths, his shoulders surging as he breathed in the warm night air. His hand reached up to touch her cheek, wiping away the dirt and ash. His touch was warm, and she was warm from their exertion, but the gentle slide of his fingers over her skin prompted a shiver. His eyes raked over her body, searching for wounds. She must have split her lip, because his eyes repeatedly returned there.
“Ben,” she said, breaking his concentration. She forced herself to stand and pulled him up with her.
“We need to go.”

He nodded, then followed her to his ship in silence. When she looked back at him, his eyes stared off into the distance, his thoughts lost to the fiery landscape. As they approached the *Silencer*, he slowed. His voice was hoarse when he finally spoke. “You need to contact the Resistance. I'll surrender.”

It was everything she had wanted to hear from him since the moment they had touched hands. He would end the conflict tearing her heart in two. He would surrender to the Resistance, and they would…

They would kill him.

“No, we can't.”

“Rey,” he argued, undoubtedly as averse to the idea as she was, but surprised by her answer, “be reasonable. After what just happened, the First Order could come looking for me, and you can't be here if that happens. I promise I won't hurt your friends.”

Rey jerked his hand forcefully in frustration. “I trust you with *them*; I don't trust them with *you*,” she snapped, angry that he still assumed she didn't believe in his true self. It was a strange sentiment after nearly meeting her end by his lightsaber only minutes before. “You were right, okay? They'll kill you. We need to contact the First Order; I'll go with you.”

“No!” His vehemence burned in his eyes like the lava around them. “I can't even protect you from myself; I won't let *them* near you. We have to contact the Resistance.”

“And what happens when Poe finds out I was here with you? I can't protect you or me from the Resistance, Ben!”

“Then, you're getting on the *Silencer*. There is only room for one passenger, you know this is the only way. I'll...” she saw a flash in his eyes, she felt something over the bond that she never thought she would from him. Deceit. “I'll... raise the First Order on comms once you’re safe. Go.” He was lying. If she left on the *Silencer*, he didn't believe he would be rescued. Why? He'd said the First Order would come for him… unless he believed they would turn on him and was prepared to die.
alone on that planet.

“No!”

“Rey…” His eyes were glassy in the orange light. She knew how deeply it hurt him to watch her fly away without him, yet that was exactly what he was suggesting. He wanted her to get on the ship and leave him behind again.

She shook her head adamantly. “I won’t. Not without you.”

Kylo didn’t answer. Instead, he hesitantly stepped closer. His smile was tender, fragile, warm in a way she had never seen in him before. Perhaps that was why it meant more to her. He slid his fingers along her cheek again, and she wondered if his purpose truly was to remove the ash as she had first believed. There was a strange fluttering inside her when he slid his fingers gingerly into her hair, tucking it behind her ear. He leaned in, and she thought for a split second he might kiss her, but he screwed his eyes shut and rested his forehead against hers instead. She closed her own eyes as he released a long, agonized breath.

In her distraction, she didn’t realize that he was accessing the Force until her limbs began to feel heavy. “I thought you would say that,” he said, his tone soft. “I’m sorry, Rey.” Her eyes sprang open as she understood, as she felt her connection to the conscious world being severed. This had been his backup plan all along. If she didn’t climb into the cockpit willingly, she realized too late, he was going to put her in there himself. The Force vibrated through her as the world around her fell away. His intense brown eyes were the last thing she saw, before she was jolted back to the safety of her bunk and the darkness of unconsciousness.
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Fighting, injuries and violence through lightsaber combat

Death

Graphic minor character death
Finn's Understanding

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story is 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Finn sat on the edge of his bunk, head in his hands, where he had spent most of his time after his talk with Rey. How had he been so blind? She had told him what had happened between them on the island; she had flown across the galaxy to Kylo Ren, as Finn had done for her on Starkiller. She called the dark lord "Ben," even then. He should have realized why she had asked him to keep their bond a secret. She never had any intention of killing Kylo or ending the bond, for that matter.

He accepted that something had happened between the two Force-users—something he would likely never understand. He had witnessed the quiet intimacy between them in her room that night and her fierce defense of him. Her admission of her feelings for the Supreme Leader shouldn't have surprised him. Now that she had admitted the truth, everything that had happened made perfect sense. Perhaps he hadn't been blind; perhaps he just hadn't wanted to see it.

His only question was "why?" This creature was a radicalized, darkness-driven, mass-murdering war criminal with a legendary temper and megalomaniac tendencies. This killing machine was not some lowly stormtrooper or officer who had been brainwashed by First Order propaganda, he was the First Order. They called him Jedi Killer! He was a raging tempest of violence and anger, a loose cannon kept in line only by Snoke himself.

Ben Solo had a legendary family of some of the most admirable people to ever set foot in the galaxy, and he had chosen to throw it all away for a life of murder and cruelty as Kylo Ren. Now he was the one ordering the death of their friends, and he had proven how merciless he could be. Kylo killed his defenseless father in front of their eyes. They both heard him renounce Ben Solo. She claimed to love Finn, but she was carrying on a relationship with the man who almost murdered him. Why? What did she see in Kylo Ren that no one else could? Even his mother had given up on him.

Now Finn had orders to kill him.

It made sense. He was a threat to the lives of the Resistance, and, whether she believed it or not, Rey. Despite her claims to the contrary, he had tried to kill her before. If he didn't get whatever he wanted—and Finn had a strong suspicion of what that was—he would do it again. Perhaps he would use the bond against her to find them all.
What Poe had ordered him to do... it was the right choice. The lives of everyone in the Resistance – no, the galaxy – were more important than the life of one man. Even if the former Ben Solo was the man Rey thought he was, Finn knew they couldn’t risk the fate of the galaxy on hope he would turn. Death and loss were the reality of war and Kylo Ren was on the wrong side of it. No one had the right answers, they were just trying to save the ones they loved. He would put his blaster to Kylo’s head and pull the trigger if it ensured the survival of his fiancée and his best friend.

His only regret was that he would have to hurt his best friend, the first person who ever saw him as more than a trained killer, to do it. Yes, he would pull the trigger on the monster that needed to be put down, as he was trained to do by the very organization he was fighting against...but he feared the moment he had to meet her eyes after.

“Knock, knock,” the sweet voice of his betrothed carried into the room. She stood in the entryway, holding a cup of tea for herself and a cup of caf for him. Somehow, she knew it was exactly what he needed and remembered exactly how he liked it. She had saved his life, yet it was the simple, everyday thoughtfulness like a cup of caf that shaped her deep love for him. Perhaps it was because no one had ever cared for him in that way before. At least, not that he could remember. Finn thought it was a silly notion, but he fell in love with her more every day over the small things.

“Hey, sparky,” he managed, rewarded with a cackle when she understood his reference. Her eyes lit up the entire room when she laughed. If his heart had not been so heavy, it would have brought a smile to his cheeks as well.

She noticed. Why wouldn’t she notice? She knew him better than anyone. “Finn, what's the matter?” He hadn't intended to tell her. It was his burden to bear. She had suffered such immeasurable losses; he didn't want to purposefully grieve her with more. But Rose was the wisest person he knew; her advice centered him when his thoughts grew wayward. This was the greatest trial he had ever faced, and, for once, he didn't have to be alone to face it. What Rose saw in him he still didn't understand, but she had promised to love him and be by his side always, and right now he needed her more than ever.

“She loves him, Rose,” he whispered, staring down at his hands. He knew the smile was fading from her lips, the gravity of his words sinking into her heart as well. He was quiet for a moment as he waited for her to consider the sobering consequences. What he hadn't expected was her response.

“I know.” His brows arched as his eyes darted to hers. She stared at him conspiratorially over the rim of her cup. There was no anger or fear twisted into her expression, only acceptance.

He couldn't help the alarm that shuddered through in his voice. “You what?”
“I knew she loved Ben Solo from the moment she told me about him,” Rose smiled gently, taking a seat next to him on the bunk. She handed him his cup, and he let the warmth bleed into his hands, soothing him. “I also knew she feared the judgment of the Resistance if they were discovered. I knew it was a forbidden love. While the revelation that he is our greatest enemy was surprising, it wasn't that surprising.”

Finn balked. This was Rose; she was passionate about saving the galaxy from oppression. The First Order had killed her family, and she hated them. She wanted to rid the galaxy of evil, and Kylo Ren was as evil as they came. “But he played a part in your sister's death!”

“So did Poe, in a way,” she said quietly, her eyes losing focus as she was momentarily transferred far away from their bunk. He knew her sister was a sensitive subject, but it was the hard truth. Whether or not Kylo Ren pulled the trigger himself, he had willingly given his loyalty to the cause that killed her. He was just as responsible. Poe, on the other hand, had made a mistake, he never intended for her to die. Poe cared; Kylo didn't. That was the difference. How could Rose compare the two?

“My sister believed in hope and forgiveness,” she continued. “And I believe the end of this war will be found through love, not hate, just as my sister did. If Rey has helped him find his way back to the light, then I can find it in my heart to forgive him. Paige would have.”

“How can you so easily accept this? Love? For a monster? It's Kylo Ren, the Supreme Leader of the First Order!” He was livid. He swore he was living a nightmare and would wake up any second with Rose gently nudging him. Kylo Ren was often the monster of his nightmares, so it wasn't too far-fetched to believe that this was one long, terrible dream. The worst one yet, in fact. It had to be a nightmare, because that was easier to accept than this.

“Acceptance is different for me than it will be for you,” Rose was still as level and comforting as ever. “I already knew she was in love with Ben Solo. I had to accept his identity as Kylo Ren. You knew his identity as our enemy, but now you have to accept that she is in love with him. To me, that is more complicated, because it changes everything you thought you knew. And you have a history with him. All I know about him is what the galaxy knows and what Rey has told me. Those two versions are at odds in my head, so if I have faith in my friend, then perhaps Kylo Ren is not the man we thought he was.”

“I can't forgive him,” he said with unyielding determination. It wasn't that he couldn't forgive him; he refused to try. “And I don't know how to be okay with this.”

"The heart leads us down strange and unforgiving paths, and all we can do is trust that it is taking
us in the right direction." Rose leaned against him and kissed him gently on the cheek.

He grunted appreciatively, leaning into her embrace. "The heart is irrational and driven by emotion, not fact."

"That doesn’t sound like you, Finn. I know that is not how you feel about love. Our mind tells us what we need; our heart tells us what we want. It's okay to be guided by both." He pursed his lips. Her poignant words were never lost on him, but he couldn’t let this go. Not this time. Not about someone as dangerous as Kylo Ren. He refused to lose another person to that murderer.

He loved his intended, but he wouldn't agree with her on this. Not when it was her life at stake. “This is Kylo Ren we’re talking about Rose! How can you want this for Rey? He’s a murderer. He’s evil! He deserves to die the most painful death imaginable!”

“All of that can be true, and I can still accept that this is the path our friend’s heart chose. I don’t have to like him to support her,” she replied. Her conviction and compassion were admirable, but she didn't know the Supreme Leader as he did. On Tuanul, he had felt the creature peering into the depths of his soul. He could almost feel the darkness inside him. He fought him on Starkiller, looking into his eyes as their blades clashed. And Finn knew there was nothing but evil inside him. Whether Ben Solo had been a decent person when he was a little boy was irrelevant. He had made his choice to become what he was, and Rey was too blinded by his decidedly non-monstrous appearance to see it.

"She was stuck in the desert by herself for most of her life. Of course she would fall in love with the first guy she has a connection with. Why did it have to be him?” He knew he was being unfair to Rey, but he was just so angry. Not at Rey—at Kylo. Finn knew he couldn't love her. If he did, he would never put Rey in danger as he had. Finn felt so powerless. He threw his cup across the room, watching it shatter and leave a stain on the wall. Rose flinched but didn't comment on his outburst.

Instead, she spoke with a softness he didn't deserve. "She had a connection with you and Han and Luke, but he is different. Why did it have to be him, indeed? Maybe her heart knows something that we don’t. I don't know much about the Force, but I do believe in fate. They were brought together for a reason. We don’t have to understand it."

"And Kylo Ren?” he growled, “He can’t return that sentiment. He has no heart. A beast is incapable of love. She gives him her heart, and all he can do is destroy it. It is in his nature."

Rose stared at him for a long moment and that terrifying look in her eye from that night outside the temple had returned. “Finn, remember the night I told you about her feelings for Kylo Ren?”
He nodded. Dread was churning in his gut.

She grasped his hand between them. “Remember when I told you there was more I needed to tell you when the time was right?”

He nodded again, slower.

“Before I knew who he was, I met Ben Solo in her room. He was –”

His skin immediately crawled in terror. He ripped his hand from hers and jumped to his feet. “You what?”

“Please, just let me finish,” she said evenly to combat his rising panic. “I went to find her and he was in her room, sitting with her as she slept. If he wanted to hurt her, or me, he had every opportunity to do it. But he just sat with me and talked about Kylo Ren. I think there’s more to him than we understand. And I think he just might love her too. I will hold out hope that they can find a way to end this war together.”

Finn was pacing, his thoughts spiraling to what could have happened. He wanted to scream or argue or throw a cup against the wall, but his knees gave out underneath him and suddenly he was on the floor with his head in his hands. Before his knees touched the smooth surface, his kind, passionate, selfless fiancée had wrapped her arms around him. She whispered calming words against his back, but they did nothing to soothe him. “Rose,” he gasped between panicked breaths, “I’m not even mad you didn’t tell me. I get it. I do. But I have been so scared for Rey. I have seen what he is capable of. I hate that he was anywhere near you. If something set him off, in one second I could have lost everything. I could have lost you both, and I wasn’t there. He manipulated her into believing he isn’t a monster, don’t let him convince you too. He’s evil. He doesn’t love her. Stay as far away from him as you can.”

“You’re worried about what he could have done, but not the fact that he didn’t, Finn,” she argued. He bit his cheek to focus his building anger. It felt as if he were arguing with his best friend instead of his fiancée. How could she defend a monster? “All of your fears could have been realized, yes, but they weren’t. That has to mean something. What if you’re wrong?”

“No,” Finn said, shaking his head adamantly, “I can’t explain it Rose, but I have this feeling… dread… that I can’t explain. But, somehow, I just know it. He is going to hurt her.”
Rose patted him on the back and sighed. “All we can do is support her no matter what happens. It’s not in our hands...”

"Maybe it is...." Finn whispered.

Rose turned him in her arms to study him – truly look at him. It made him feel dirty to sit there and hide the whole truth from her. "Finn, what are you talking about? 'Maybe it is' in our hands? How? Something is bothering you – something more that you're not telling me. You knew they had a bond. He is as much of a threat to us now as he was then. Maybe less. What does it matter if Rey loves him? Or if he loves her in return? Wouldn't it be better for the Resistance if the Supreme Leader has a secret affair with one of its members? They could end the bloodshed. Why are you sitting here, so deep in conflicted thought, about something you know we can't change? Is there something else going on? What are you not telling me?"

He wanted to tell her about his orders. He did. But how do you tell the woman you love that you are ordered to kill the man your best friend loves? She would look at him as if *he* were the monster. He knew it was his duty, but he feared what she would say. His heart was conflicted already. Still, he almost let the words pass his lips.

"Nothing," Finn sighed instead.
Chapter End Notes

Brief aggressive display

Male character throws something
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See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Rey shot up from her bunk in terror when she awoke in the darkness alone.

*Ben!*

The events on Mustafar immediately flooded back into her thoughts as she regained consciousness… as did the anger. *How could he?!*

Kylo had taken the choice from her. He had used the Force against her… again. They could have figured a way out together, but he hadn’t treated her as an equal capable of playing a role in her own fate. She couldn't stand him. She loved him. It was complicated. All she knew was she was going to give him a piece of her mind. *No one* was allowed to make decisions for her.

Her immediate desire was to begin pounding on the barrier of their bond in anger until he answered for his transgressions, but when she found the place in her mind where their connection should be, it was dark. Her blood ran cold. It did not escape her that the reason for his absence in the bond was likely nefarious. In that fear of the unknown, her anger was sidelined. Rey *wanted* to be angry with him; wanted to focus on his lies, his decision, and his darkness on Mustafar. Anger would have been easier to weather than dread, but she had no proof he was even alive. That left her little to hold onto when all she could do was wait.

She knew rest would elude her that sleep cycle. She had a difficult enough time sleeping when she did not have the delineated day and night patterns of a world; this only made it worse. The steady hum of the hyperdrive was a constant reminder of reality. Lying in her bunk, alone, she listened to Finn and Rose whisper and giggle in their bunk down the corridor, making the silence of their bond all the more noticeable. The uneasiness deepened with every moment that passed. Rey tried to twist the missing pain or fear from his side of the bond into reassurance, but it only served to trouble her more that she couldn’t feel anything from him.

“How, where are you?” she whispered to the darkness.

She began with disquieted nudges against his presence in her mind. When there was no response, she searched for him. She followed the glowing band to his consciousness, but there was darkness where she typically found his mercurial energy. Before that moment, even when he was unconscious, she had felt him in the bond. Had he destroyed it? Was he even *alive*? Wherever he was, he was unreachable to her.
The silence lasted twenty-seven minutes—she counted. It was the displaced spark of fear that jolted her upright in the bunk. It wasn’t her fear. The heavy whimpers and groans from the other bunk across the room had her tiptoeing into the darkness.

Instinctively, she knew it was him.

“Ben?”

There was not a flinch of recognition at his whispered name as she inched closer. His dark form lay curled on his side, facing away from her. Standing next to him, she could see the familiar dark sheets of his bed. Kylo hadn’t bothered even to remove his boots before collapsing atop of the blankets. She climbed over his trembling form, lowering herself down next to him.

Rey had witnessed the peaceful innocence of his reposed face when the Force had brought her to him before; it was what she expected when she settled into place facing him. But seeing his current condition startled her. Dark bruises were forming under his eyes, his lower lip was split open by a deep cut, and dried blood was still smeared across his face.

His physical wounds were not as worrisome as the sweat rolling down his forehead or the trembling pinch between his brow. He was asleep, but it was far from peaceful. The Force felt like a vice, squeezing them under the weight of his fear. It physically hurt to endure. She wondered what dream could be possibly causing so much fear. Tentatively, she touched him. “Ben?”

His breathing quickened as she swept his unruly hair from his face. He turned toward her palm as if seeking out her warmth…or her light. Resting her hand against his temple, she closed her eyes. She focused on memories of him that brought the light spilling over like laughter from inside her; she remembered the softness of his voice when he told her she wasn’t alone, the warmth in his eyes when he told her she was beautiful, the strength in his arms when he held her, his unwavering trust in her as he followed her up the mountain of debris at the castle. She found the light in her love for him with hope it would calm his tumultuous energy over the bond.

His face softened under her touch. His breathing became even and soft. As wide awake as she was only moments earlier, the contentment she felt in his confirmed safety induced an immediate heaviness in her eyelids. Closing her eyes, she had almost faded from the conscious world when she felt a warning in the Force.

His eyes snapped open.
In between breaths, he had shifted from unconscious to very much awake. Pouncing on top of her, he pinned her to the bed with a forearm, his other hand leveling his ignited weapon at her throat. His eyes were fierce and fearful in the crimson light, burning like the heat from the blade that singed against her sensitive skin. “Ben?” she whispered. Any other words were frozen in her throat.

The sound of his name seemed to jolt him from his poised attack. “Ben, it’s okay, it’s me,” she said, trying to contain the fear in her voice.

“Rey?” Blinking rapidly as the ferocity faded from his eyes, he extinguished the blade and threw the weapon away from them. He released a shuddering breath, collapsing to his side next to her, his hands falling over his eyes as he struggled to control his breathing. She felt terrible, knowing she was partly responsible for his fear of being awoken from sleep, but in the next moment, he was concerned for her.

“I'm so sorry, I thought… he was… it was… just a dream.” His voice was still soft and raspy from sleep, and she would have found it endearing if he wasn’t so panicked. “That was the second time today I almost killed you.”

“Ben, no… no! I’m fine. Are you?” Hesitantly, she slid closer to him, waiting patiently until he uncovered his eyes. When he did, she could see the heaviness of his eyelids; his fear had faded into exhaustion. Hesitantly, she unfurled her hand and laid it across his temple again. “I was trying to help you sleep.”

“Rey, I –”

“Shh,” she whispered. “Tell me in your dreams.” She wondered if he could feel her light soothing him as it passed unbidden into his overwhelming darkness across the bond. If he felt it, he didn’t flinch or pull away. She wished she could do more to control its flow, to give him everything she had, but she was hopeful it was enough.

The calming effect was near-instantaneous. Surprisingly, he trusted her, blinking slowly before he surrendered to his exhaustion. Rey felt the moment his body became heavy and his breathing slowed.

His expression was free of the earlier pain, but his peaceful slumber wasn’t as comforting as she had hoped. Her hand slid down to the blanket between them. It took everything in her not to grasp onto him in fear. She refused to accept the idea of closing her eyes and waking up without him… not again.
Rationally, she knew he was safe in his bed, but the void left by his silence filled with fear as she remembered when she had felt the weight of his unconsciousness before. The night in the receiving hall...after his injury on Concordia...in the throne room; broken moments when she was forced to leave him, unaware of his fate. How many more broken moments would she suffer through the fear of not knowing? How many more broken moments would the Force fall on their side? Would she one day watch him close his eyes for eternity? Would she know? Or would she be dragged away across the galaxy and never be granted the chance to say goodbye?

His face was a brutal reminder of the war they fought; a war that had been complicated more by a dark side machine. She worried her lip as she realized how close his recklessness had brought him to death. Starkiller... the *Supremacy*... Concordia... Taris... now Mustafar; from his earliest memory to their last connection only hours before, someone had attempted to take his life. Lightside, dark side, friend, foe—they had all had their moments to betray him.

On his current path, nearly every other being in the galaxy was his enemy, and the majority would not forfeit the opportunity to kill him. Even so, her fear did not rest in his brushes with death. She believed in his strong capabilities as a fighter, as well as her own. With the bond, they had been unstoppable against the toughest opponents. No, she feared moments of weakness like Kamino and what she had seen in the darkness of Mustafar.

She feared the moment he gave up. *I can fight beside him, but I can’t save him from himself. His fate will always lie within himself. If he turns, it will be because he wants it. If he dies...* Rey feared it would be by his own hand. To him, it would be a chance to control his own destiny, something she now understood was important to him.

It would be a slap in the face to every person who had tried to save him, yes, but also to every person who had tried to kill him. Of all the legacies he could leave behind, what could be more legendary than a dark knight who could be killed by *no one* but himself. His beliefs were still faulty, but, having been given the chance to know him, she was beginning to *understand* him. This was a different darkness he would have to fight, but it was a darkness all the same.

*How can I make him want to fight?*

Consumed by the spiraling thoughts plaguing her mind, she gasped when his fingers slid around her hand lying between them. Kylo had initiated the touch – it was far more forward than she expected from him.

*Perhaps it’s just a –*
“Your thoughts are loud,” he murmured, his eyes still closed. The touch was purposeful, then. “Sleep.”

Rey stared at their clasped hands; the point between them where they were physically connected, though she knew their connection burrowed much deeper. If only that union were enough to end the war. Weeks ago in a fire-lit hut, she believed it was, but now it seemed impossible.

Rey yawned. She felt as if she had been awake for weeks. Her fears were faded whispers as the comfort of his touch soothed her. The heaviness of sleep overtook her before she had the chance to fight it.

There was a warmth on her face and the gentle lapping of water. Rey opened her eyes to a bright light. Blinking, she observed a sun high in a bright blue sky. The heat radiating from the star was pleasant, nothing like the unforgiving sun over the Jakku desert. Turning onto her side, she found herself staring out at a shimmering lake. Their lake. She sat up, only then sensing the familiar energy next to her. His eyes traced the soft, rippling waves at their feet, so she focused on the lake as well. His deep voice finally broke the silence.

“Did you kill the Zabrak?”

“Before or after you used the Force to knock me unconscious?” she asked, her earlier anger had evidently been reborn into sarcasm.

His stare didn’t break from the water, but he pressed his lips together thoughtfully, as if he was serious in considering her question. “I assume… before.”

Rey had assumed he would apologize in his own way; he would rationalize his choices with twisted logic, but he would still show contrition for what he had done. Studying his profile, however, his softened features seemed more relaxed than usual. He couldn’t bother to even look contrite.

“You’re not sorry,” she realized, stunned. “Are you?”

The hint of a smirk formed on his lips. “Not at all.”

The sharp anger she had felt when she had awoken had dulled as she sat in his company. She didn’t want to fight, not when his mortality was plaguing her thoughts, but she needed him to know that
what he did had been wrong. “But you lied to me, Ben. You used the Force on me. How can you
expect me to trust you to see me as your equal when you make my choices for me?”

Kylo shrugged. “You lived.”

“That’s not a reason to –”

“Yes, it is,” he answered, his tone brokering no room for further argument. He tilted his head to
squint up at the sky above them. “I will sacrifice anything, even your trust, if the alternative is your
life.”

“I killed Maul,” she reminded him. “With your weapon.”

He sighed, and Rey wondered if he was disappointed in her. His voice didn’t betray it if he was.
“How did it feel to kill him?”

“Good.”

It was the truth. Was it what a Jedi would have done? She didn’t care. Maul would have been a
threat to the entire galaxy. Had she trusted his fate to the Force? No. Would he have survived the
fall off the tower? Possibly not. Though she knew it wasn’t her place, how could she trust in the
Force’s will? Sidious would still be alive if Kylo had trusted the creature’s fate to the Force; she
wouldn’t take that chance with Maul, either. She would be forever grateful she had trusted the
Force with Kylo’s life, but this was different.

Wasn’t it? Yes, Sidious had whispered his command, but she would have done it on her own. Yes,
it was revenge for what she thought he had done to the man she loved, but how was that wrong?
Maul didn’t deserve to live, plain and simple. As if he heard her thoughts, Kylo responded with a
warning. “You know that’s darkness, Rey.”

She glanced over at him, but his stare was still fixed above them. “I don’t feel under its control
now like I did before.”

“That’s the part I don’t understand,” he said. “What I felt in you before… it was stronger than
anything I have ever felt in anyone. Yet on a planet thick with darkness, I didn’t feel it in you. It
doesn’t make sense.” Rey knew why, of course. Sidious had been the darkness he had felt in her
thoughts, but she had blocked the creature out of her mind after she discovered the whisperer’s true
identity. She had only felt Sidious on Mustafar after Kylo had fallen, when she allowed the
darkness in. That meant she could block out the creature as long as she blocked out the darkness.
Sidious wouldn’t control her anymore. “Whatever it was,” he continued, none-the-wiser of the
secret she held, “it’s nothing like the darkness I’ll soon have to face. After Mustafar…I don’t know
if I can do it.”

“You won’t have to do it alone,” she assured him. “If Sidious creates his Dark Army, I’ll stand by
you to fight them, Ben.”

His eyes shifted to hers as if he distrusted her words; as if he couldn’t have foreseen a moment
where she would ever stand by him. When he found only truth in his search, his gaze shifted back
to the lake. She could feel the thoughts thundering on the other side of the bond, but he remained
silent in his conflict. When he finally spoke, the deep tones of his voice were nearly drowned by
the soft waves lapping at her toes. “I’ve lived in the shadows; I know what lurks there. You don’t
know what kind of monsters you would be facing, Rey.”

Was he doubting her strength, or his own? They both knew he couldn’t win the war by himself;
he needed her. “I’m not afraid.”

“You should be,” he said, his eyes finding hers again. “I am.”

“I’ve made it this far; I think I can handle myself.” She tried to steady the frustration in her voice.
She wasn’t afraid of facing Sidious, Maul, or any other long-dead Sith. She didn’t fear death; she
feared loss. Those fears were far greater than the nightmares hidden in the darkness. “I’ve seen the
monsters, Ben. I’ve stared straight into the eyes of the worst.”

His expression remained grave. “That may be…but you’ve shown them who you are now.”

Rey swallowed the uneasiness that was steadily rising. “So?”

“So now the monsters are staring back.”

There was something in the Force that prickled the small hairs on the back of her neck. It was a
warning, leaving her uneasy as she faced the truth of Kylo’s words. She had faced ruthless

creatures on Jakku. She had faced Sidious and Maul and survived. If she fought by his side, what was there to fear? “Let them stare. You and I are powerful together. We can fight them.”

He grinned gently at the sentiment, but his eyes remained troubled. “It’s not the physical battleground that I fear, Rey. They are not after the weaknesses of our flesh. There are worse ways to harm us than wounds, trust me.”

“And our bond is stronger than they could ever imagine.”

Her words didn’t soothe his doubt as she had hoped. Instead, his eyes grew distant, and she feared she had lost him to his own thoughts again. “What about my darkness?” he said after a moment. “What happened at the castle – that doesn’t scare you?”

“What did happen?”

“I don’t know,” he murmured. “I could feel the darkness from the Finalizer. It was the strongest concentration I’ve ever felt. I am well acquainted with the influence of darkness, but this was… something else. It had control over me. I had to fight it to stop myself from… hurting you. I know it sounds crazy because he’s dead, but I swear I felt Sidious.”

Rey knew she should have told him when she discovered the identity of the whispers in her head. He could have better prepared himself against the creature on Mustafar, but Sidious had otherwise not found Kylo after his death. She knew what the fear would do to her bondmate if she told him that the creature who tortured him had returned. If Sidious couldn’t reach him, then she would help Kylo destroy the machine, and he would never know about the voices in her head. If Sidious found him now that he had been exposed to the darkness on Mustafar, then it wouldn’t matter if she told him. She wouldn’t worry him unnecessarily, but she wouldn’t lie to him either. “It’s not crazy, Ben. There was so much darkness there.”

“I almost killed you.”

“Yes, the darkness controlled you. But you fought it. Even when you were all but lost to it, you wouldn’t kill me. That is all that matters.” It gave her hope. Kylo hummed doubtfully, but it was the truth. He had fought the darkness on his own and won. The mask was gone, and though she couldn’t trust her friends with him, he had offered to surrender to them. He could escape from the First Order and be free. She just had to be patient; it was only a matter of time before he made the right choice.
The wind blew the Force through the free strands of her hair, swirling around her in a warmth that felt *real*. Closing her eyes, she breathed in the energy around her, as if she were actually there. She wished she could stay in that beautiful place by the lake with him, without any of the complications of war. “What if we stayed here forever?” When she turned to him, he was watching her with an expression that warmed her more than the sunlight or breeze.

Rey expected him to answer with his typical logic. *We can’t, Rey. This is just a dream.* There was a sadness behind his smile, but his answer surprised her. “Yeah? What would we do?”

She stretched her toes in the cool water. “You would teach me how to swim in this lake, so I wouldn’t have to use the bond next time I fell in.”

There was something tentative… _cautious_ in his voice when he spoke again, as if he feared her reaction. He said it in a way that almost sounded like a question. “I could show you the underwater caves?”

“If they’re anything like the last one,” she said, “no, thank you.”

Kylo’s eyes were soft as he worked his mouth. “I think the last one turned out okay.”

“I guess it was okay,” she replied, biting her lip to hide a grin. “What would we do after you taught me how to swim?”

“I would take you to the archives, so you could learn about anything you wanted. I would show you my favorites when I was… young.” The excitement in his tone was both heartwarming and heartbreaking. There was a passion in him she had only ever seen when he was talking about politics. His energy was different than before; his expression was _eager_ and _lighthearted_. She wanted more than anything for him to show it all to her.

“And after you show me every story worth reading,” she said, trying to maintain an even tone, “we’d steal a ship –”

“You would steal a ship, I wouldn’t know the first thing about such anarchy—”

“Not at all,” she laughed, her tone playfully sarcastic. His hair blew across his forehead in the breeze as he watched her laugh, and she wished she was close enough to run her fingers through it.
He looked nothing like the "perfect" version of himself she was certain she could imagine in her dream state. He was scarred, cut, and bruised, but she found him far more beautiful than when she first met him. He had looked more like the embodiment of a dream back then, but he behaved like the nightmare he was hellbent on becoming. His attractiveness was not appealing then, only confusing, because it did not reconcile with the creature she had first imagined.

As it turned out, he wasn’t the creature she had first imagined. Even if he hadn’t yet found a path she could walk with him, he was no longer on the path he had once chosen. He was still lost, but she understood him now. She knew who he was and believed in him to make the right choice. She no longer feared her feelings for him, because she no longer feared she would have to walk away for good.

Her love for him opened her eyes to everything she appreciated about him, including his physical attractiveness. He looked beautiful; silent as he watched her with fervent eyes, stoic as the breeze played with his hair. Kylo had likely sensed a change in her over the bond, but she couldn’t help staring back. She couldn’t remember the last time she could sit and enjoy his beauty without conflicting emotions, or if she had ever before felt this fluttery feeling in her stomach from the fire smoldering in his eyes.

The heat of his stare caused her smile to fade, the energy between them nearly tangible in its density. For a brief moment, she wondered if there was something behind the intensity in his eyes; she wondered if he could want to touch her, too. Excitement at the possibility replaced her usual doubts and fears of her unworthiness. It was everything she could ask for in a dream. Her eyes drifted to his lips as he spoke. “I would take you anywhere in the galaxy you wanted to go, Rey.” It was an admission she never expected from him, but Kylo was nothing if not breathtakingly unpredictable.

She exchanged his vulnerability with her own. “I would ask you to take me all across the galaxy and show me every beautiful thing you’ve ever seen – ”

There was something in his eyes then, something more than the hunger that threatened to devour her. It looked an awful lot like hope. “I’d take you to gardens,” he said, his voice free from the conflict that plagued him. “And parades with fireworks and caves filled with crystals and buffets with food from all over the galaxy and every archive we could find with holobooks about worlds you could never imagine—”

“And we would spar with training sabers every day to hone our skills,” she said with a smile, joy swelling in her chest that he cared enough to know offhand the things she would love. “You would teach me everything you know about the Force.”

You need a teacher! His voice from the fight on Starkiller shouted in her mind. She would have
believed it was her memory, if her own face, illuminated by blue, hadn’t flashed across the bond. “Lightsabers and the Force, even on a ship? I’m not sure you understand my destructive tendencies.”

“We’d make room…and fix what was broken,” she said, closing her eyes and tilting her chin to let the heat of the sun warm her face as completely as his words warmed her heart. “And for jobs, I would be a mechanic, and you would be… a writer—”

His voice was warm and playful. “Oh, really?”

“Yes, with your calligraphy.”

Kylo chuckled quietly, and she could almost hear the smile in his voice. “The galaxy is in desperate need of calligraphers.”

With her eyes closed, she could almost imagine the life of happiness they would share. “What about children?”

“Children?”

“Yes, Ben, you know what those are, don’t you?” she laughed, opening her eyes to study him. There was something indecipherable in his stare. She watched him swallow past the words he feared to tell her. “I haven’t ever considered them,” she tried. “The cosmic responsibility terrifies me, to be honest. If you don’t want them—”

“I don’t know if I can have them,” he answered softly. “Sidious…the lightning…he wanted to make sure I couldn’t produce offspring who would ‘weaken me with sentiment.’ Part of me agrees with him—maybe the darkness in the Skywalker line needs to end with me.”

“Oh, Ben.”

She cupped his cheek, and he turned into her touch, whispering his words against her skin. “Just another way he broke me.”
“You’re not broken, just scarred,” she traced his scar lightly down his face. This time he didn’t flinch.

“If it’s destined to be just us for the rest of our lives, I couldn’t think of a happier life to live,” she murmured. His eyes found hers, and for a brief moment, there was a spark of something brighter than she had ever seen in them before. It faded with doubt, but she was determined to bring it back. “And when we’re not exploring beautiful worlds, you would teach me how to play chess and cards —”

“And what would you teach me?” he said, as if it would be a gift to learn from her. “How to build a droid, perhaps?”

“No, Blue wouldn’t like that; he would be too jealous of another droid. I would teach you how to build a speeder and something unexpected…like gardening.”

The rumble from his chest as he chuckled made her smile. She opened her eyes to fully enjoy it. The man was emotional, but smiles and laughs—especially lighthearted ones—were a rarity. It made her wish they truly could stay in their dream world. Her smile faded as she realized that, just like the dream, none of it could be real. Glancing up at him, he met her falling smile with a sad grin, as if he had been waiting for her to realize it all along. Perhaps he had meant none of it, or believed she had meant none of it.

She felt the prickling of wistful tears when he spoke again. “When you woke up every day, I would have put your hair in braids, and you would have complained because I have fat fingers and would pull it too tight, and it would take entirely too long.”

She huffed a soft laugh, smiling through tears. “At night, I would have closed my eyes and sighed as you took them all out. Then I would have forced you to hold me until the morning, so we would never have nightmares again.”

His stare returned to the water and she wondered if she had gone too far, if his flinch as her love flooded the bond was due to fear or regret. “I wouldn’t have been a writer,” he said after a moment, and the seriousness in his voice caused her other thoughts to fall away. “I always wanted to be a pilot. I could have transported goods or clientele for my uncle. You could have flown with me, we could have…” he sighed. “We could have.” He nodded to himself after he said it, as if it had once been an option for him, and the worst part was, she wondered if perhaps it had. Rey quickly swept the tears from her eyes. She didn’t want to ruin the moment with sorrow.

“We could pretend for tonight that it’s all true,” she said, painting on a smile.
Her eyes found the lake again. It had been vague and indefinite in her dream state, but the details sharpened as she stared at it. There was a sudden truth to the grass underneath her fingertips and water at her toes that made her uneasy. It felt as if she had been asleep, but now she was awake. It was how one would feel if they had awakened from a coma, the vague awareness of a sudden return to reality and the passage of time. There was a call in the Force, drawing her attention to a bag next to her that she hadn't noticed before. Inside, along with a change of clothes, were two silver encased lightsabers with a knob on the side. She had seen the same type of sabers in his memories.

*Training lightsabers.*

“Spar with me; pretend it's just us and this beautiful world.” She turned the knob to the lowest setting, ignited it, and leveled the blade at his face, challenging him. His lips twitched, but he remained silent. There was something different about him, too. The bruises had faded from his face, even the dark circles under his eyes were gone. His hair was shorter, as it had been when she first met him, the curls framing his face. This wasn’t a memory of the man she first met, however. The faded line of his scar still cut down the side of his face. It was the eyes that gave her the most pause. They seemed younger, devoid of conflict, but also... wise. As he studied her, there was a soft pinch in his brow. She wondered if he saw something different in her as well.

Rey pulled another lightsaber from her pack, tuned it and tossed it to him. Without another word, she lunged forward, swinging the lightsaber down with velocity. On pure instinct, he activated the weapon, barely blocking her strike. The brilliant blue of the blade halted her blade inches from his face. She felt a swell of excitement in the bond and smiled. Kylo was still sitting, so he pushed her back with the Force, buying himself enough time to stand. The push knocked her off balance as she stumbled into the lake. She struggled to stay upright but inevitably fell backward into the shallow water with a splash.

Gasping in shock, she sat up, soaking wet. The lightsaber still buzzed in her hand, her veins on fire despite the cool water. He snorted as he stifled a laugh, extending a hand to help her up. But instead of accepting his help, she struck out with her lightsaber, burning his hand. He moved into a defensive fighting stance, feigning a serious expression. A sly smile crept across Rey’s face. She attempted to paralyze him with the Force, but he spun his weapon as if he were blocking blasterfire. Rey realized as he continued to move unbidden, that he had used his energy to prevent the paralysis.

“So there *is* a way to block Force attacks in a fight,” she said. It didn't make sense. She hadn't been contemplating such a thing, but she had said it anyway, as if she knew she was *supposed* to say it, merely following a script.
“Only if you know it’s coming,” he replied, twisting the blade in a lazy flourish. “Or you have the Force-neutralizing armor of the Praetorian Guard.”

Rey considered attempting to tear the lightsaber from his hand, but she knew from experience how quick his reflexes were. Any other Force attack he would likely have an answer for, and she didn’t have the element of surprise. She was a scavenger, she would have to find another advantage against him. She thought back to their fight on Starkiller and his memory she had seen earlier. The smile returned to her lips. “There’s so much I want to learn,” she said coyly, standing and moving slowly toward him, doe-eyed and innocent. “Will you teach me?” He dropped the lightsaber at her disarming words and the feigned helplessness that was so entirely out-of-character. His brain seemed to malfunction for a moment. She didn’t know where the idea had come from; she certainly never considered using that tactic before, and even if she had, she would have never been foolish enough to try it. Somehow, it came naturally, and it was effective.

Unfortunately, her tactic had surprised her as much as it surprised him and she didn’t properly take advantage of his hesitation. Kylo called the weapon with shaking fingers and what little sense he had left, pointing the blue training blade at her. She should have known he wouldn’t fall for it. From the beginning, he had known she was far from helpless. “Not until you deactivate that weapon,” he chuckled, suppressing a smile; she could feel the warmth of it across the bond all the same.

The casual way he stood, his demeanor, the expression on his face, even his chuckle reminded her of younger Ben Solo. In his eyes, however, there was a jaded, remorseful darkness of a man who had suffered and caused suffering. It reminded her that this man was not the young Ben Solo. But even more, it reminded her that this man was not the perverse and intimidating Supreme Leader of the First Order.

This who you could be.

Rey shook away the thought as the pain tightened in her chest. She was now in striking distance and swung the blade wide, forcing him to step back. He fought defensively as she controlled the pace of the duel. His strikes were powerful, methodical, but not jarring. He challenged her, took advantage of her oversights, but did not overwhelm her. There was no sense he was insulting her by going easy on her, but it was playful; he reminded her more of the young Jedi in his memories than the powerful darksider on Mustafar.

He wasn’t pulling from the power of darkness, but then, neither was she. He did close himself off from their bond the best he could, so they would not sense the moves the other would make. Not that it made much of a difference; she felt like she knew his next move without any assistance from the bond.
Where he excelled in reach and power, she was superior in speed and agility. He back stepped slowly, avoiding slashes to his legs or sweeps at his neck by curling in on himself. She, however, stayed straighter to absorb the strength of his blows. They both quickly found ways to exploit the other’s weaknesses. Kylo missed in a powerful swing and the momentum left him exposed. She caught his shoulder with her blade. When she left her midsection unprotected as she raised her weapon above her head, he caught her in the side. The training sabers left burns in their wake, but neither cared.

His eyes were bright in excitement, and she realized it was the closest she had ever seen him to "happy." His past, her past, the war, the weight of the galaxy, their fate… none of it mattered except the clash of their blades. When she caught him with a particularly good hit to his side, she swore he smiled. A real smile.

Kylo – it felt wrong to think of him with that name – had just completed a dizzying succession of strikes that had knocked Rey off balance when he hesitated. He allowed their sabers to clash, but he seemed distracted by something over her shoulder. Taking advantage of the opportunity, she kicked him in the chest. Rey was never one to pull her punches, and she knew he would have been disappointed if she did.

With his higher center of gravity, she knew he would end up on his back. He braced his fall with the Force, saving himself the trouble of getting the wind knocked out of him. She was quickly on top of him, her training saber at his throat. Breathing heavily, she smiled in victory. His eyes returned her smile in their warmth. Being the stunningly unpredictable man that he was, he reached up and smoothed away the wet hair that clung to her face.

Her breath hitched sharply in surprise at his touch, and she dropped the training saber. It deactivated as it fell, leaving a small burn mark on the left side of his neck before dropping into the grass, nearly rolling into the water next to them.

“We’re being watched,” he whispered hoarsely, though she wasn't entirely certain it was because of the burn. She looked up in panic to see a group of young children walking toward them. She sat back on her knees and he sat up, wrapping his arms around his long legs. The children laughed and squealed as they approached, and Rey realized they were both about to be far out of their element.

A young Twi-lek male was the first to speak. “Are you fighting?”

“Oh, no,” Rey said. “We were sparring.”

The children looked between each other in confusion. “What’s sparring?”
Rey looked over to Kylo helplessly. It wasn’t as if she had any experience with children. She huffed in irritation before turning toward the Twi-lek. “It’s…”

“…pretend fighting.” Kylo finished.

“Why?” The young Twi-lek continued, and Rey found herself searching for an adequate answer that would permanently satisfy his curiosities.

“To sharpen our skills.”

“What’s that mean?” a younger Bothan male cut in.

Kylo answered for her. “We’re… teaching each other.”

Why are you so much better at this than me? She asked him across the bond. How do they understand you and your…”

Pretentious vocabulary?

Those were not my exact words… She thought, biting her lip to hide her amusement… because I don’t have a "pretentious vocabulary."

It doesn’t matter. Once they start asking "why" on repeat, it will make me question my knowledge on anything I ever thought I knew, anyway.

“Are those lightsabers?” A brown-haired boy with freckles asked.

Kylo looked at her for help, but she just waved her hand with a flourish.

You answer. You’re better at this. Somehow.
I had practice with a droid first.

Or you’re just better at being a child. Kylo turned to glare in her direction, but he couldn’t hide the playfulness in his eyes. Of the two of us, you certainly have more experience with childhood.

He studied her carefully, his expression softening when she grinned. It was the first time she had openly mocked her past, but she knew he would understand better than anyone. He pressed his lips together to hide a smirk.

By default, he quipped.

Her smile grew wider. I’m sorry I missed out on those awful names and broken noses.

“Because those looked like lightsabers—” the boy continued, oblivious to their secret conversation.

You’re right; your imaginary friends were much nicer.

At least the whispers in my head were actually imaginary.

Kylo snorted. Starvation will do that to a person.

—and I’ve never seen a lightsaber before, but I’ve heard stories about them from—”

I thought that was sleep deprivation?

From fearing those monsters in Niima daily?

At least they weren’t very good at disguising themselves as allies.
At least I had allies.

“—and it was blue, and those are blue, so they have to be lightsabers —”

At least I have allies now.

Yes, The Hutts have been known to be valuable allies to the Jedi.

They are probably about as loyal as your general.

At least I know where I stand with my general.

“—and he said the Jedi weren’t real, but he also said that droids couldn’t remember, but last time —”

Of course, you know where you stand, everyone wants to kill you.

At least my parents tried to blow up my planet instead of abandoning me on one.

Rey bit her lip to stifle a giggle. They did abandon you with your uncle, who considered murdering you.

At least they waited until I was old enough to fend for myself before abandoning me. She could hear the humor bouncing around his thoughts.

At least when my parents abandoned me, they got some money out of it.

Kylo laughed. He hid it behind a hand, but it was a real, carefree laugh. His eyes crinkled in mirth. She couldn’t help smiling as she watched him. It didn’t make sense, but it was cathartic, to find humor in her trauma. If anyone else had heard the conversation, they wouldn’t have understood. It meant more than she cared to admit that he did.
“So are those lightsabers?” the boy finished, out of breath.

*You shouldn’t be smiling, that was truly awful. Dark side humor for sure. That’s it; you’ll never be a Jedi. Ever. There’s no hope for you.*

Rey wrinkled her nose at him as he continued laughing, the warmth of it radiating across the bond.

*We’ll see how funny you think you are when you have to answer all of their questions,* she intoned lightheartedly.

*You think it the best idea to let these impressionable young minds be influenced by the greatest Supreme Leader of all time?*

*Greatest.* She snorted. *Sure, tell them all about galactic domination, I’m certain they’ll understand that.*

“Are these lightsabers, Ben?” she asked innocently with a smile.

He grunted as he realized she had trapped him. “Yes.”

“Are they real?” the young Bothan asked.

Kylo’s brow furrowed as if he had never considered that a lightsaber wouldn’t be real. “Yes.”

The Bothan trembled with excitement as he stepped closer. “Can we touch them?”

Kylo glared at him.

“No.”
“Why do you wear all black?” A younger, curly-haired boy asked, and it was only then that Rey considered Kylo’s clothing. As he had from the first day she met him, he was wearing all black, but these clothes were different. The heavy cloaks, cowls, and tunics were gone, leaving a simple shirt and trousers in their wake. The more she studied it, the more she was certain the shirt wasn’t black at all, but dark grey. It certainly wasn’t what he had collapsed into bed wearing.

“Why do you wear blue?” Kylo countered.

“I like blue,” the boy said. “Do you like blue?”

Rey sensed Kylo’s growing irritation across the bond. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you about talking to strangers?”

“I don’t have one anymore,” the boy answered. The remark was ordinary to Rey. She didn’t have a mother. Neither did Poe or Rose or Finn or Kylo anymore, for that matter. It was a part of life and war. “Do you live here?”

Kylo’s demeanor did change, however. The remark clearly affected him more than it had her. She sensed remorse, and she wondered what he had sensed from the boy, or read in his mind, to soften his previously agitated tone. “I was born here.”

The boy sat at Kylo’s feet, intent upon staying longer than Rey had hoped. “Do you still live here?”

“No.”

“Do your parents?” She could see the flicker of pain cross Kylo’s eyes.

“No,” Rey cut in, hoping to spare him that heartache for one dream. “And neither do I.”

The boy turned, focusing his inquisition on her. “Where do you live?”
“With Ben,” she lied, not knowing exactly why she said it. “We travel the galaxy together.” He glanced up at her, a question in his eyes, but he didn’t challenge her.

“Is he your brother?”

Rey smiled at him, before lowering her eyes to the grass. “No, he’s not.”

“Are you a Jedi?” one of the young boys asked Kylo. Rey glanced over at him nervously. It was a dream, of course; these children were not real. If he did react in offense, it wouldn’t matter to them, but it would matter to her. His eyes darted to hers briefly, a strange emotion brimming inside him before he answered.

“I trained as one,” he replied slowly, finding a sudden, engrossing interest in the wet grass blades under his palm. “A very long time ago.” The last part was whispered so softly, she doubted the children heard him in their excitement.


Rey was quiet. He had managed the Jedi question well enough, but with the mention of the man he believed had almost murdered him….

“This is Ben,” she cut in, “Luke Skywalker was his...” What would be less hurtful to say? Master, who failed him, or uncle, who gave up on him? As it turned out, she didn't have to decide.

Kylo Ren, the Supreme Leader of the First Order, answered on his own. “Luke Skywalker trained me at his Jedi temple, but he was also my uncle.” That garnered an eruption of awe and excitement from the children, loudly talking over one another. They didn’t see the shudder of his shoulders or hear the hint of pain in his words, evidence of a wound still deep and raw. They didn’t notice his energy swell in the bond as he struggled to control both his emotions and the sensory overload in the Force from their screams and giggles. Her hand found his in the grass, her palm sliding over his fist. His hand loosened under her touch, and she slid her fingers over his knuckles, interlocking them with his. It was easy to love him here, in their dreams, away from the war. He was easy to love when there was nothing driving them apart. She bit her lip as she glanced up at him through her lashes.

The intensity in his eyes shouldn’t have surprised her, but the shiver that rolled through her under his searching gaze certainly did. Her body’s reaction confused her. She shivered, but she wasn't
cold—quite the opposite, in fact. Everything she felt around Kylo was new and confusing. She had that desire again that she'd first felt on Ahch-To to simply touch him—on his hands, his face, in his hair. He had allowed it when they lay in bed together; she wondered if he would allow her to do it again.

She was broken from her thoughts and Kylo's intense stare by tiny fingers on her arm. “Girls can be Jedi too?” a little girl asked her softly, pointing to the lightsaber in her lap.

“Of course, they can!” Rey smiled. The girl was the smallest of the group, especially compared to the heights of the non-human children.

“Girls can't be Jedi!” an older red-headed boy laughed. “I've never heard of one.”

“I trained with many Jedi who were girls,” Kylo said. “This is Rey, and she is very powerful. She defeated Kylo Ren.” Rey turned to him, his words heavy in the air between them. There was something in the way he said it that made her hope he meant it as more than in battle. A grin played on the corner of his mouth. “Just look at what she did to my face when I tried to fight her.” The children stared in adoration at Rey, speaking over one another to ask her questions, but she had too many thoughts trying to force their way off her tongue. The strongest thought was—is any of this real?

“Ben, show them what you can do with the water,” Rey said instead. Perhaps it was just a dream, because she felt that feeling again, as if it were scripted... or it had happened before. She knew she had never dreamt it before; she would remember Kylo Ren suddenly becoming so gentle and kind. And he looked unsure as ever as the children surrounded him, so he likely didn't share her strange feelings. He looked down, and she followed his line of sight to their clasped hands. After a beat of reluctance, she released her grip of his hand, and he waved smoothly over the lake rippling next to him. The spout of water reached up toward his hand, and he maneuvered it free. He manipulated the sphere of water in front of the children as they watched in awe.

“Can we touch it?” the little girl asked.

Kylo nodded stiffly.

“That's the best part,” Rey said. “Put your hand in the middle of the bubble; you can feel its energy.” Each of the children took turns playing with the Force bubble. Kylo glanced up and caught Rey smiling at him, but she couldn't help it. He looked so young and innocent talking to the children. It reminded her of his softness toward Blue. She realized she was still staring when he blushed.
“Children!” a nanny droid called nearby, and Kylo allowed the water to fall away between his fingers. *We should leave,* he said. *This is a core world.* It was an odd thing to say; the First Order had control over the Core Worlds, so why would he care about being seen there?

“Let’s go play Jedi!” one of the boys announced as they ran off toward the droid.

They picked up sticks and began play fighting with them. “I get to be Rey!” the girl declared. Kylo watched them disappear out of sight, and Rey wished more than anything to know what he was thinking. She reached forward to grasp his hand again, to plead with him to say what was on his mind.

But a sharp jolt forced her eyes open as the ship exited hyperspace. She found herself in her bunk, burrowed up next to Kylo, who had turned away from her in his sleep. Her arm tightened around his broad frame, and she tucked her nose against his spine. He released a contented hum, but otherwise, his breathing remained slow and deep. Rey curled further into his warmth, careful not to wake him, to allow him the sleep she knew he desperately needed. She enjoyed the safety and comfort he provided, though she knew better than to get used to it. She knew—just like the dream, just like everything else—it would one day be taken from her, too. But for the moment, she allowed herself to enjoy it, to *dream*, and was lulled back to sleep by his steady heartbeat.
Chapter End Notes

Aggression

Character reacts aggressively when awoken
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Rey rummaged through her bag. She had packed it full of tools, rations, and a medpac for her journey, but it was the weapon at the bottom that held her interest. She stared at both halves of Luke's broken lightsaber.

*What am I doing?*

She was running away to a far-off planet with no plan once she landed there. Where would she *find* a Kyber crystal? How would she know which one to take? If she couldn't fix this one, how would she make the new lightsaber work? Where would she find the parts to fix it? She removed the fractured Kyber crystals from the heart of the mechanisms, rolling them in her fingers. What if she couldn't fix what they had broken? What kind of Jedi would she be without her lightsaber? Even if she had her own blade of plasma, would that make her a Jedi?

She was no closer to that dream than she had been when she escaped Jakku. She had learned little from Luke or the texts. The most she had learned was from a self-proclaimed darksider. Her bondmate. The man she loved. Her connection with him would always be a threat to the people who needed a Jedi the most. It was complicated, something a single Kyber crystal couldn't fix. But a war was coming, and there were only two sides.

Why had she come to Ilum, if she planned to separate from the Resistance after she built her weapon? A true Jedi wouldn't abandon good people when they needed hope. Could she leave them all to their own fates? As deeply as she couldn't fathom making the choice to kill Kylo, she couldn't leave them all and pretend the war never existed either. Could she? If her place was no longer with the Resistance, then where was it? Why had the Force drawn her here? Was she hoping it would change her mind? Or was she waiting for him to make the choice easier for her? The dream from the previous night had only served to give her hope that she wouldn't have to fight against him. If he was by her side, she could fight for what was right. She wouldn't have to fight for the Resistance to fight against the First Order.

It was a hope that seemed more foolish the longer she spent away from him, just like this search for a Kyber crystal. Where would she start searching for one on a planet the size of Ilum? How would she know if it was the right one? She wanted a crystal that she could form a bond with, but the whole process seemed daunting. She turned the broken mechanisms over in her hand, wondering if there was a way to salvage the one she had. She was a scavenger after all. It was familiar, and familiar was simpler. If she could make it work, then she could leave the Resistance before she was forced to do something terrible.
“Hey, Rey,” a voice said from the door.

“Hey, Rose,” Rey replied, turning to smile at her friend, “is it my shift?”

“No, I just came to check on you,” Rose’s voice was gentle, her eyes scanning the cuts and bruises on Rey’s face. How could she explain her fight on Mustafar with a long-dead Sith and her bondmate over a Force connection? Rey waited for the inevitable questions. The one she received was pleasantly surprising. “Are you okay?”

Rey was thankful she didn’t pry, so she chose to let her in. “You wouldn't happen to know anything about lightsabers, would you?”

“No,” Rose answered, smiling, “But it couldn't hurt to take a look.”

Rose examined the two halves of the broken weapon with a meticulousness that reminded Rey of her bondmate. “Well, I'm familiar with the Diatium power cell, focusing lenses, cycling field energizers, and this here is an emitter matrix, so I could help rebuild those. I assume the plasma created in the blade energy channel is projected through these crystals, giving you the blade. Everything seems in relative working order besides this part that was ripped in half. It looks like the chamber that holds and focuses the crystal, or, in your case, crystals. These crystals are fractured, so it wouldn't work as it was built. What did you do to this thing?”

“Do you want the real story?” Rey asked, “Because you might not like it.” Rose shrugged and waited patiently for Rey to choose whether or not to trust her with the truth. “It was broken when Ben asked me to join him on the Supremacy. He killed Snoke to save my life, but after we killed the guards together, he wouldn’t help me save the fleet. He asked me to join him and destroy everything instead. I knew I had to save the fleet on my own, but he had my lightsaber, because I threw it to him when we were fighting the guards. So I called my lightsaber, but he called it, too, and we fought over it until it exploded.”

Rose was quiet as she continued to examine the object in her hands. “Well, you two definitely did a number on it.”

Rey waited for more, but Rose’s attention was focused on the internal mechanisms. “That’s it?”

“Well, yeah,” Rose said, pursing her lips in confusion. “What did you want me to say?”
“I don't know... lecture me on how stupid I was to try to save him, or tell me I deserve to have it broken for going there in the first place.”

Rose smiled, then returned to her work. “No, I don't think love is stupid.” Love? Rey remembered when Rose had asked her at the temple if she was in love with “Ben.” Evidently, she still believed it. That meant Rose knew that Ben was also Kylo. It wasn’t surprising; Rey should have realized Rose would inevitably discover the truth after the incident in the war room, but it surprised her more that Rose never confronted her about it.

“Even if I love our enemy?” Rey replied softly.

“Nope, not even then. Love is love, and no one should ever tell you who to love. I trust you,” Rose said as if it was as simple to understand as gravity. “So, what are we going to do with this lightsaber?” Rey could only find sincerity in her open energy. In a complicated war, caught between a complicated rebellion and a complicated relationship with a complicated man, Rey appreciated Rose. She trusted her.

Rey shrugged. “Salvage it, hopefully.”

“Sure, we can try,” Rose said as she tried to fit the two broken pieces together again, “but we would need access to the parts required to build the internal mechanism. They might have something we could use on Dantooine.”

“What about the crystals?”

Rose chewed her lip in thought. “We could try to alter the chamber to project the plasma through both crystals, but my fear is we wouldn't be able to find a stable enough setting to hold both crystals to focus the amount of heat your power cell is creating. You'd end up with a bomb without another way to divert this heat.”

Rey thought of Kylo's use of a crossguard lightsaber to divert the heat, but his crystal, while fractured, wasn't split in half. “What if I use one crystal?” she asked. “It might not be as strong, but it could work.”

“If you can fit it in this internal chamber, we might be able to adjust it. I would have to see the blade ignited first.”
Rey placed one of the halves of the crystals in the chamber and pressed the trigger. Nothing happened. “This doesn’t look like Ben’s did in his memories. His was *hovering* in the chamber.”

“The Force?” Rose suggested. Rey grinned. Not only was Rose trustworthy, but she was smart. Rey glanced down at the weapon in her hands.

“Hopefully.” It couldn’t be any different than lifting rocks. Rey concentrated on the knowledge she had gained from the Force—from Kylo—and focused the Force through her fingers. She held the crystal in the chamber with the energy, held the two halves together as best she could, and toggled the trigger. The bright light was her only warning before the crystal exploded into her hand, slicing through it and grazing her shoulder before lodging itself in the wall behind her.

The pain didn’t set in for a few seconds as she stood in shock, but when it did, she cried out into the room, grasping at the wound as if it were on fire. It certainly felt as if it was. She stumbled to the refresher, dropping lightsaber parts along the way. With trembling fingers dripping with blood, she turned on the faucet to run water over her wound.

Hissing through her clenched jaw, she cursed when the water only increased the pain. Her thoughts were a jumbled mess in her panic as she stared down at the hole in her palm. No amount of water would fix *that*. As she stared down at her hand, the refresher transformed around her, beige giving way to black. Her breath hitched when a familiar large hand suddenly—and all too calmly—wrapped around hers. She would have pulled her hand away if he hadn’t been holding it so firmly. Logically, she knew he shouldn’t have been there, but his touch was so soothing she couldn’t find it in herself to care. Even the comfort of his powerful energy settling over her senses, however, wasn’t enough to focus on the burning hole in her palm.

Her mind was numb to just about everything but the pain, otherwise, she would have said *something*. She would have asked him what he was doing in that refresher when it had been empty seconds earlier. Or she would have told him that she had injured herself on Star Destroyers more times than she could count, in much more life-threatening ways, and she hadn’t needed help from anyone then. She would have said those things, but his hand was so gentle and methodical as he inspected her wound, and his touch was… comforting. No, she didn’t need his help, but she found herself grateful for it. Perhaps it was okay to let him.

Kylo didn’t say anything as he shifted his hold, cradling the back of her hand to catch the blood. If he was panicking from the gaping *hole* in her hand, he hid it well. She winced from the sting as he placed his other hand on top of her palm. The warmth of his hand was painful at first, but then her wound began to tingle. The tingle transformed into something else entirely; she could *feel* bone melding, blood vessels reforming, tissue repairing. It felt like a million tiny droids were crawling around inside her hand, fixing her.
She would have panicked, but the energy passing between them numbed the ache until the pain subsided completely. His light was soothing as it passed inside her and blended with her own light. The thought of carrying a part of him inside her left a weightless, fluttery feeling inside her chest. If she could just explain moments like this to the others, she believed they would change their minds about him. But how could she ever explain the significance of something like this to the others when they would never give him the chance?

It ended entirely too quickly, and only after the light had faded did she realize she had closed her eyes. When she opened them, he had removed his hand from over hers. With a twist of her wrist, hampered slightly because his fingers were still wound around it, she realized that the wound on the other side of her hand was gone as if it never existed in the first place. It struck her then that, had she known about it, had she allowed him to teach her before, she could have helped heal him when he had needed her. Turning to remind him of that fact, and to thank him, she finally had the chance to take him in. The lightsaber parts she still held in her other hand clattered to the floor.

He was wearing a black towel. It looked luxurious and soft, like his dark raven hair. Maybe it was made of nerf-wool—the towel, not his hair. Speaking of his hair, it was dripping into a puddle on the floor next to his feet. His feet were bare, and so were his legs... and his arms... and his shoulders... and his chest... and his abdomen... because all he was wearing was that towel.

It was odd, seeing parts of his body like his toes or his navel or his knees or the scar that tore jaggedly up his calf. When he shifted, she noticed a little more of the sun scarred skin of his thigh, and she felt privy to something far more exposing than the first time she had seen him stripped down to trousers. Perhaps it was because, as overdressed as Kylo typically kept himself, there was only a small slip of material hiding him now. That line of thinking brought a blush to her cheeks, and she realized she had been staring entirely too long. By the time she dragged her stare up to his, Kylo’s eyebrows were nearly to his hairline, and she should have probably looked away but...

“Rey?”

“Ohmm?”

Kylo cleared his throat. “I asked what happened. Twice.”

She forced her eyes to remain on his face. She meant to tell him exactly what had happened, but that was not what left her lips. “You’re not wearing any clothes.”
“I…” Kylo stared down at himself as if he had only just realized his state of undress. “I was in the shower, and then you came running in here bleeding all over the place.” Her mind began wandering to the implications. He had been in the refresher, in the shower, without clothes, only moments before. She had been connected to him when he was partially clothed before, so she knew it was a possibility, but if the Force could connect them at such a vulnerable moment… what other moments could they be connected? She had bathed outside her entire life—survival made no time for modesty—and a body was just that… a body. Or, at least, that was how it had been. With him, it was different. When she had first seen him partially bare on Ahch-To, it was the first time she had noticed what anyone was, or was not, wearing. What if the next time, she saw more? Or, far more terrifying, what if he saw her? What would he think? Her curiosity and wonder were replaced by fear. The darkness found her in an instant as she felt the familiar fears of inadequacy resurface.

Rey was distracted from her thoughts when she felt him pulling from the Force. The two halves of the lightsaber popped up from the floor and into his palm. Extending his hand, he offered them to her. “I was attempting to repair it,” she said by way of explanation. “I should have known better; all I do is fail.” What had begun as seedling feelings of inadequacy were devoured by thoughts of failure, shrouding her in fear and darkness before she could consider fighting back.

Kylo’s brows immediately furrowed. “No, building a lightsaber is –”

His voice was drowned out by the whisper in her head. You are nothing, no one… you weren’t born to the bloodlines of legends… you are a scavenger… not even your parents wanted you… you will never be a Jedi… you have too much darkness… the only skills you have you stole from your enemy… not even he could love you or want you… your friends will all leave you when they discover that you’re not worthy of a lightsaber… you are a burden to everyone you loved… all you do is fail, and cause pain and disappoint –

“Rey!” His strong arms jolted her shoulders roughly, and she glanced up into his searching eyes. “What was that?”

“Darkness,” she answered. She attributed her surprising honesty to the hazy fog her mind was cast into during the shock of her injury. It was a dangerous path to give him an insight into her darkness.

“Yeah, I got that,” he said, panic threaded through his voice. “Where did it come from? How did it –”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s why I’ll never be a Jedi,” she spat the word, her voice vehement. “I’m not good enough. No matter what choice I make, I fail. I cause pain and disappointment, I’m a burden to the Resistance, and our bond has only ever been a burden to you—”
“That’s not true! You are not a burden to me, Rey, you’re the only reason I—”

“Then how about a threat?” She swiped at the tears stinging in her eyes. “I’m a threat to the Resistance because of my connection to you, and I’m a threat to you because I almost killed you seven times—”

“I only remember twice,” he said, his mouth twitching into a smirk as he tried to draw her back from the darkness. It disappeared quickly as he understood it wouldn’t be enough. “And I earned them both. But you threw your weapon down on Mustafar. You were going to let me kill you instead of hurting me, Rey, when I deserved to be—”

“All I ever do is hurt you!” she cried. “I don’t deserve you! I don’t deserve my friends! I’m only pretending to be a Jedi –”

Kylo dropped his hands from her shoulders, stepping back slightly to study her. ‘You don’t deserve me? Where is this coming from? You’re not – ”

“That’s not what I meant!” His voice said across the bond. “I meant you were nothing to this war, or those people, or this galaxy… just like me. You weren’t tied to a destiny, you had no legacy to fulfill; you could be whatever you wanted! I saw what Plutt called you on Jakku. I thought you would understand what it felt like to not be wanted by anyone. The First Order made me someone worth fearing, and I thought you would want that power, too. With me. I just wanted you to stay with me. I thought you weren’t important to them, not like you were to me, but I was wrong; when I saw what you were to the Resistance on Crait, I knew how important you were to them. I had no one. I was nothing. The galaxy needs you, Rey, and that is as far from nothing as you can be!

The darkness, however, had dug its claws into her deepest insecurities. “They need someone I’m not! Any skills I have were stolen from you! I can’t even fix a lightsaber! What happens when they realize what I am? I’m just a Scavenger!”
“Rey, please…”

“No,” Rey shook her head feverishly. “They’ll abandon me like my parents did! So will you! I’m not good enough for –”

“Stop it!” He firmly grasped her face in his hands so she would look at him. His eyes were on fire, but the anger wasn’t directed at her.

“No, Ben!” she cried through hot tears, shoving him away. “It’s the truth!”

“The darkness convinces you of lies!” he shouted. She showed no fear of him—she knew he would not harm her in his anger—but his next words came out softer and more controlled, as if she had. “Sweetheart, please, believe me. Luke failed you, the Resistance failed you, I failed you; there isn’t a word strong enough for what your family did to you, but you’re more than good enough. I don’t know how you don’t see how important you are.” His eyes were glassy, his emotions crashing into hers across the bond.

Her darkness, however, was steadfast.

“I’m not! I’m not important enough to be loved! I’m not important enough to be wanted! I could die tomorrow, and no one would—”

“And I would have nothing left to live for!” His voice was trembling to match the shuddering in his body. His hands reached to cup her face again and she allowed it. They were warm as his thumbs swiped at her tears. “I told why I said those things in the throne room; I wanted you to stay. I told you…you were not nothing, not to me, because you’re… because I…”

There was something in his eyes, in the bond, something that told her she was very wrong about what she believed he felt for her, but it was gone before she could decipher it. A shadow passed over his thoughts, and he closed his eyes. When he opened them, there was only sorrow and regret. “You’re important. Your friends, they love you, they need you. Your parents can burn in Hell for what they did.” He shivered. His voice had lost its comforting warmth.

As her darkness faded and his eyes grew darker, she realized what he was doing. He was helping her, drawing the darkness from her through his hands on her cheeks. She had succumbed to its temptation, not him, but he was carrying that burden for her. She felt guilty, of course, but also…
cared for. “Are you okay?” he murmured, his eyes dissecting the emotions in hers. She nodded in response. “It’s my fault. I’m… unpracticed with Force healing. I might have drawn on your light as well. It left you vulnerable to darkness.”

She nodded again, replaying their argument in her head without the blurred lens of darkness, as she had often done over the past weeks. “Dev once told me,” he continued softly, “that being a Jedi is not about lightsabers or Force abilities. It’s supposed to be about selflessness, empathy, compassion and hope. You already are those things, Rey, more than most Jedi were. You don’t need the texts or the skills or the weapon to prove that.” His hands slipped from her face as he stepped back. “But I can help you… fix your lightsaber, if you want.” The lightsaber parts slipped through her fingers again.

“You would help me?” she asked, her voice bright with hope. The remaining darkness was cast away as she smiled. Without any thought for the consequences, she squealed and wrapped her arms around him. His chest still heaved from the storm of emotions and his own battle with darkness. Rey tilted her chin to stare up at him, wondering if she had crossed a line.

Only as she watched him, wet hair in his eyes, body trembling, did she remember he was only wearing a towel. It was difficult to forget, with the large expanse of skin peppered with moles and riddled with scars, but somehow she’d managed it in the emotional turmoil. Her hands spread wide over his bare back; his skin was smooth and warm, equally soft yet firm. Closing her eyes, she breathed him in, fresh from the shower. She sighed contentedly, but her attention was drawn back to him when she felt him tense underneath her.

The look on his face was neither anger nor fear. Though the rest of his face remained passive, his eyes smiled. “Of course, as long as you promise to stop listening to the darkness.”

Rey leveled him with a pointed stare, trying her best not to smile. “No promises.”

Kylo huffed a soft chuckle and nodded, finally wrapping his arms around her. “Fair enough. Then promise me I will never again have to hear you say that ‘no one would care’ if you died.” She pressed her face into his warmth and sighed again. There was something immediately stress-relieving about being close to him.

She nodded into his chest. “I promise.”

“Actually,” he amended. “Promise you won’t talk about yourself and death in the same sentence.”
She snorted and tilted her chin to glare at him again. His expression made her forget all about her feigned irritation. The way he was looking at her—she wished he would stop. It caused her stomach to flutter and made her feel slightly off balance. As if he had no clue how the dulcet tones of his voice tormented her, he continued in a soft murmur, “I wish you could see yourself the way I see you.”

“Me, too.” She meant it in every way she could. She wished she could see what he saw; she wanted to feel as important as he believed she was. She wished she knew what he saw, how he felt, what he thought when he looked at her. She wished he would see himself the way she saw him, too, because then he would turn like she believed he would.

A drop of water from his still-damp hair cascaded down the scar on his shoulder, Rey’s finger caught it before she realized what she was doing. When it was gone, she splayed her hand over the scar, as if it could be healed from her touch after all that time. She studied the barely noticeable scars littered under his skin and wondered how deep they had once reached. “Sorry, I forgot my cowl,” he whispered, noticing her focus.

Meeting his eyes, she grinned. “I don’t mind.” Kylo’s stare shifted from her eyes, down her face, to her hand and back again. There was a raging conflict in the depths of his dark irises, and she wondered what he could possibly be conflicted about in a moment when she felt only contentment. Shifting away from her, he cleared his throat and called the halves of lightsaber to his hand. Understanding his hint, she stepped away from the comfort of his arms.

“So how do I fix this?” She asked as he examined them meticulously, much as Rose had. “I’d prefer not to blow a hole through my hand again.”

“I’d prefer that, too,” he said, his eyes glancing to hers for an instant before returning to their careful study. “But the crystal is sheered in two.”

“It could work; I haven’t gotten that far yet. I was trying to center it in the chamber to ignite it first.”

“I can show you,” he murmured. Her hand moved toward his temple, intent upon taking the memory he offered to show her, only hindered by the light grasp of his fingers as they wrapped around her wrist. The pressure of his fingers increased until her hand fell from his temple, landing on his cheek instead. “I can show you; we can do it together, if you want.”

He wanted to physically show her, teach her. Kylo was still on the other side of the war. He knew if she used the weapon, it would likely be used against him. Yet he wanted to help her.
Perhaps… he believed when she used it, he wouldn’t be on the other side anymore. She stared up into his eyes, forgetting the whole galaxy as she smiled. This was the man in her dreams. He had healed her with the Force, with his light, and was offering to help her repair the lightsaber they had broken. Together. It was as if, for one moment, the two sides of himself had come into balance.

*Ben Solo.*

“Wow.” A voice said behind her. Loudly. They both turned toward the interruption.

*Rose.*

She had forgotten about her friend after the crystal exploded through her hand. Rose had obviously not forgotten her, especially with the shouting between them only moments earlier. Rey had no estimation of how long she had been standing in the doorway, nor any desire to find out. She knew how it looked. There was little space between them; Kylo was dressed in only a towel, her hand was underneath his on his cheek. She stepped away from him and immediately felt colder.

“Rose, I –”

Rose, however, didn’t look upset. “No, I get it. I *totally* get it now.” She was beaming, as if she welcomed the development.

Rey still felt the uncomfortable desire to explain herself. “When I… he was… we were… this happens sometimes.”

“I bet it does.” Turning to Kylo she giggled and snorted. “Nice to see you again, towel... I mean, Kylo... Ben... ” Rose looked to Rey for help, but she was too busy biting back a laugh. Then her friend’s words took root and she turned to her questioningly. They had met before? Rose seemed to understand her confusion. “We met once, when I only knew him as Ben Solo. You were sleeping. He was wearing more clothes then.” Her words faded to a whisper. “Obviously.”

Kylo nodded politely, but Rey didn’t need to look at him to know he was agitated; she could feel his growing discomfort over the bond. Clasping his hands in front of him and hunching his shoulder, he was still large in the tiny space, but less so. It was the slightest change, barely noticeable, but Rey knew him. She sensed his distinct desire to curl in on himself and hide—something she never expected from Kylo ‘I can take whatever I want’ Ren.
It was preposterous that he believed he had anything to hide. *Have you seen yourself?* Rey was adamant in her belief that he had *nothing* to be ashamed of in the physical department, but what concerned her most was she had never seen that side of him before. As she thought of his usual attire, however, she suspected that this side had always been there. Covered head to toe, perhaps it was less about intimidation and more about control and *concealment*.

Kylo had been confident when she had first seen him shirtless on Ahch-To, refusing to meet her demand to cover himself. It had seemed arrogant and dismissive then. Now she wondered if he had been as uncomfortable then as well, and he had only become defiant at her commanding him. Or, maybe he had been comfortable with her in a way he was not with Rose. *Maybe both.* It was a coping mechanism, a way to protect himself from vulnerability after the torture he had suffered under Snoke, she was *certain*; but could it be so pervasive he didn’t trust *anyone*? What she did know was that Kylo was staring at the puddle at his feet, his fists clenching and unclenching in irritation, and she wouldn’t allow him to suffer needlessly.

“Rose, give us a moment?” she asked with a smile.

Rose, to her credit, immediately took the hint. “Oh, yes, of course; I have so many things I’m needing doing.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m needing…doing?” her friend whispered to herself as she walked away.

“Rey?” The uneasiness in his voice brought Rey’s attention back to her bondmate. “Where are the others?” he asked. She felt him attempt to access more of her surroundings and pushed back. “It’s not too late to use persuasion.”

“I’m not using persuasion, Ben.”

The muscles in his jaw jumped in agitation. “If she’s not paying attention, she doesn’t need to be weak-minded to use it on her.”

“It’s okay, I trust her. She won’t tell anyone,” she assured him. “She didn’t even tell *me* she had talked to you before. And besides, she knows I love you.” With those words, it was as if she flipped a switch. His side of the bond became jagged and icy, and she wondered why he had such a visceral reaction whenever she told him that truth. It wasn’t doubt she felt across the bond; no, this
was something closer to anger. She couldn’t understand it, not with the way he touched her, not when he looked at her like that.

Instead of walking down that path of torment, she lifted half of the lightsaber. “Any ideas?” she said, attempting to control the ache she felt at his rejection.

His eyes found hers again and he seemed thankful for the change of subject. His side of the bond slowly softened until he could speak to her again. “Without finding a new crystal?”

“I figured the Falcon might have some of the parts if…our new base doesn’t,” she said, choosing her words carefully. He may have been her bondmate, but she had a responsibility to protect her friends. “Do you know where that stuff would be stored?”

“It’s not only the housing that concerns me,” he answered distractedly, lips pursed, as he pressed his finger into the focusing chamber. With her broken lightsaber still in his hands, he called his weapon from his counter and unscrewed the hilt to access the inner housing. With the internal components exposed, he handed it to her. He stared at her until she began to examine it, then refocused his attention to the focusing chamber of her weapon. “See?” Ever the student, his voice was warm with excitement. “Mine is only cracked, and you can see how I had to redesign everything to account for the instability. I don’t know what would happen with a broken one.”

“What about creating two different lightsabers from the two crystals?” she asked. “I used two lightsabers against Darth Maul, and that gave me an advantage.”

His eyes danced around the room a moment as he considered her idea. She was thankful, for once, for his studious inclination. “That junker freighter has changed hands a few times before you found it,” he said, and she chose not to press him on his intentional ambiguity. “If they’re still there, I might know about some spare parts packed away in the smuggling compartments, but you won’t find a Diatium power cell, which is your only practical option for a power supply. And that amount of power would be difficult for half of a fractured crystal to focus, anyway.”

Where Kylo’s strength was his knowledge, hers was problem-solving. She took a moment to admire the efficiency of their collaboration when they were focused on the same goal. “What if I make a special fitting for both crystals inside the one I have?”

“You can,” he said distractedly as he moved across the room. With his back to her, he tilted the lightsaber to use the artificial lights to assist his examination. His focus was on the hilt as he unscrewed something on the bottom. “I’ve heard of three crystals being used, but the placement has to be precise, and I only know how to center the one. Either way, they’re fractured, so you’ll need to
create venting for the heat.”

“I told you, Rey,” Rose cut in from the other room. “Bomb.” Rose made a rough approximation to an explosion sound to supplement her point. Kylo was bending down next to his droid but stopped as he realized there was another party privy to the conversation. Rose seemed to sense their hesitation. “I only heard that last part! I wasn’t eavesdropping at all!”

Rey lowered her voice anyway. “Where would I find the supplies?”

“It would be easier to show you,” he said, standing as he twisted the bottom of the hilt back into place. She was going to ask him why he was interested in that part of the lightsaber, when he turned, distracting her by tapping his temple. “Go ahead, take it.”

“Thank you,” she said. She walked forward and touched her fingers to his wet temple. If her other palm happened to balance on his chest, it was purely for leverage. He was warm and his energy vibrated through her fingers and she felt the familiar flutter in her stomach. That transformed into something more; a desire to do more than just touch him. She stepped closer, as if she were drawn to him by something even stronger than the Force. His eyes pinned her with a weighted stare as she closed the distance between them; it sent a shudder of excitement down her spine and over her skin. His lips parted in a soft gasp when her eyes settled on them. Certainly, he must have known what she wanted, yet he hadn’t moved away. He swallowed thickly.

“You know proximity doesn’t matter, right?” he murmured, “You accessed my abilities on Crait and Starkiller across….”

“Shh, I know. I wanted to be here.” Her hand was still splayed against his warm skin, her other hand resting against his wet hair. His eyes roamed over her face, dissecting every twitch of emotion. The Force grew heavy between them as it had often of late. She had first noticed it in the turbolift when she had discovered he had conflicting feelings for her. It had terrified her then, but it excited her now. Kylo could never love her, but perhaps he wanted her. His head dipped, only a fraction, and she wondered for a split second if he intended to kiss her.

Kylo’s attention shifted to the left. She didn’t sense fear, only urgency. His eyes remained fixed on something she couldn’t see when he said, “I have to go.” It was instantaneous. He had been there, solid and imposing in the small space, and then, in a blink, he was gone. It was so simple to open a connection—she hadn’t even felt the draw of the Force this time—but it was the simplicity of severing it that unnerved her most.

She stared at the empty space he left behind long after he disappeared. The disquiet she felt every
time their connection closed twisted in her belly again. His hasty exit was unnerving, but he wasn’t afraid, so she tried her best not to be as well. It was difficult when she loved him; it was an ache she didn’t know how to soothe. Her entire life had been spent alone, and, though she had faced death, she had never learned how to be brave for someone else.

It had never been her intention to fall in love with him. It was safer to wait until after he had saved himself, when he wouldn’t feel she was pressuring him out of love to do something he didn’t truly want, because it wasn’t up to her to save him. She would have stayed away if it weren’t for the Force. She saw him changing, making the right choices, allowing the galaxy to see him for who he truly was, and she fell in love with him in the process. She was good at waiting, she believed in him, but she never realized how difficult it would be to love someone at a distance.

She exhaled slowly. “Bye, Ben.”

“Wow,” Rose said from the doorway. “You've got it bad.”

Rey groaned. “I know; spare me the lecture.”

“He does, too.”

Rey narrowed her eyes, turning to glare at her friend. “It’s not like that.”

“Come on, Rey,” Rose grasped her shoulders, her smile too knowing. “It took me one second watching the way he looks at you to know he's in love with you. And why wouldn't he be?”

“He's not—”

“He is,” Rose said, taking the lightsaber parts from Rey’s hands, carrying them out of the refresher and back to the workbench. She shouted over her shoulder as she walked. “But fair warning: after your dark and broody space boyfriend turns and he’s, you know, wearing clothes, I'm stunning him.” She patted her belt where an electro-shock prod was hooked next to her blaster. “It's the least he deserves for joining the evilest organization ever.”

Rey hurried to catch up to her friend. “If he turns, you would forgive him?”
“Choosing to forgive has more to do with me than it does him. It doesn't change how I feel about the First Order, but if he makes the right decision, then why would I fault him for it? Finn served the First Order, and I forgave him, because I know his story,” Rose shrugged. “If you watched Kylo...Ben...what should I call him?”

Rey bit her lip to suppress a grin. “Ben.”

“If you watched Ben murder his own father and still forgave him, then he must have a story too. One Hell of a story, but that's beside the point. I trust your judgment,” Rose patted Rey on the shoulder while she pulled on a wire inside the lightsaber. “But you got to slice his face open, so I think electro-shock is a fair compromise.”

“Maybe not electro-shock,” Rey said. “It might remind him too much of Force lightning. I'm positive he would rather you slice the other side of his face open before you do that.”

Rose winced sympathetically. “Snok…”

“Something like that,” Rey answered softly. “It's not my story to tell.”

“It's okay; you don't have to tell it for me to know there's a lot more to him than meets the eye.” Rose never once glanced up from her efforts on the workbench, but Rey could see the blush forming on her cheeks. “And I know how that sounded, but it definitely was not a comment about all that skin I just saw. But I do have to say, even with a piece of cloth wrapped around him, that man is...intense to be around. You're made for each other.” Still staring at the broken weapon, she stuck out her hand, palm up, “Hexdriver.”

Rey found the tool on the bench and handed it to her friend. “Intense?”

Rose gesticulated with the tool in her hand. “Well, yeah, look at him.”

“I'm sorry, I hope you didn't feel threatened by—”

“By what?” Rose smiled as she worked. “The only lightsaber he's hiding is under that towel.”
“Rose!” Rey slapped her friend on the arm. “I think I’ll go find those parts to fix *my* lightsaber.”

Rose hummed. “Sure, sure, run away when we get to the good stuff.”

Rey moved to the door, shaking her head as she smiled. She hesitated just inside the doorway, glancing back at Rose. Her friend’s focus was on the lightsaber, sticking her tongue out comically as she tightened something. Rey’s smile warmed into something more private. Rose was truly an amazing person. She could see how her best friend had easily fell in love with her. There was so much to love about her. “Thank you… for all your help. I know you probably have other things you’d rather –”

Rose looked up from her work. “This is what friends are for, Rey. We help each other.”

It was strange to have friends. Finn had come back to the place he had been running away from, just to rescue her. He had kept her secret about Kylo longer than he really should have. He had committed treason for her. Even after she continued to hurt him by talking to Kylo, he still was there for her on her journey away from the Resistance. He still cared about her, even after he found out she loved the man who had tried to kill him. It had taken her longer than it should have to realize that Finn would always stand by her. Finn was special; he was her brother.

She never thought she would have anyone else stand by her, too. Rose had only ever shown her the same loyalty as Finn, and it was difficult to believe that anyone would want her for anything other than how she could help the Resistance. It had seemed impossible that they would be there for her, no matter what, even if she was in love with a man who had hurt them all. But they were. If her friends were willing to forgive him, she had hope that maybe she could have the life she envisioned with Ben Solo, with her friends by her side. She deeply cared for them all, and she would do anything for them; she had never considered that they would do the same for her. She felt like a scavenged part that had just fit perfectly into a larger machine. Maybe she didn’t have to live up to their expectations of her as a Jedi to keep their love.
Chapter End Notes

Partial nudity

Brief sexual innuendo
Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Kylo looked down at himself, clad only in training trousers and his arm guards, the straps crossing over his bare chest. He considered permanently disabling the Master Comms with his lightsaber, a more palatable option than answering it in his unprepared state. He had asked his general to update him on the success of his raid on Barkhesh, however. This was likely the report he—as the
Supreme Leader—would be waiting for, and if he wanted to maintain appearances, then he knew it was a call he should answer. He should, despite confidently knowing how unsuccessful it would be.

The Supreme Leader had received an anonymous message early that morning announcing the cargo has been transported successfully. He had no doubt it was from Maz, as she had promised. That was their deal, after all. On the cargo freighter outside Taris, he had provided the coordinates for the base on Dantooine. A few days later, he had received an encrypted message questioning his intention for providing those coordinates. His response had been simple; you know why. After a few more responses, it had been settled. No one would know who had given Maz those coordinates. If she transported Rey to Dantooine safely, then he had ensured that the First Order would never find that base with a simple deletion in the computer archives. As far as the First Order was concerned, Dantooine had been destroyed by the Empire. He’d had confirmation of Maz’s message that they had landed safely at the base when the Force connected him with Rey and her friend earlier.

He had just finished a shower, and not just a sonic shower like most of the personnel had access to, but a real shower with water. Not that it mattered; he would have been exposed either way. He had felt her pain first before she burst into the refresher, perhaps that was why he had enough forethought to wrap a towel around himself before rushing to her aid. What if she would have interrupted him a few minutes earlier? What if he had interrupted her? It was a definite possibility with their strengthening bond. At least the women didn't seem to be as uncomfortable as he was with the situation. The first time Rey had seen him without his full regalia – sans tunic after training – she had challenged him, so he had challenged her back. After she had crawled into bed with him in their overwhelming grief, her touch had become familiar, and he had grown more comfortable when she stumbled upon him without a tunic.

But this time was different. He was keenly aware as she touched him that he was only wearing a towel. All he could do was stand vulnerable before her, barely focused enough to consider that her friend could have posed a threat if she wished. Perhaps he was in a good mood, or perhaps he trusted her. He would have to trust one of her friends if he found a way to leave the First Order. He hadn't seen a way he could defect without leaving her or her friends at risk, but if they were safe on a world unknown to the First Order…

There was a chance. It was an unrealistic dream, but that was more than it had ever been before. Nothing could happen, of course, until he destroyed Force Destiny. Kylo could feel it in the Force; his fate was fast approaching. Whatever was going to happen would happen soon, and he would ensure that Rey and the Resistance survived the war—even if it meant bringing down the First Order himself. It was strange – terrifying – that he was making plans, actively considering treason. The man he was a few short months ago would have executed him without a second thought.

Now… his uncle was dead, but it wasn’t as satisfying as he imagined. His mother was dead, but he still loved her. His father was dead, but it hadn’t killed the light inside him. He never imagined
leaving it all behind, never believed that there was anything for him beyond the First Order. But now he had something – someone – who gave him hope that his life didn’t have to end as a servant to the dark side. He knew she didn’t mean the things she said in the dream, but her words planted a seed.

The Knights were due any day. They could help him storm the Command and Emergency Bridge. Once the controls to *Force Destiny* were destroyed on the bridges, he could destroy the machine himself. Then he and the other Knights could escape to the Unknown Regions. Rey would never leave the Resistance, but they would still have their bond. There was something… warm, tender in their bond now. Was he a fool to hope it would stay?

“Supreme Leader!” Hux barked again. Kylo pulled on a sleeveless undershirt and stormed into the other room to answer the comm.

“General?” Hux's visage appeared in hologram, and Kylo attempted to ignore how under-dressed he felt as water droplets dampened the collar of his undershirt. He was thankful Hux was not in the room with him, because he had a strict glove and mask policy around the man. In his current attire—or lack thereof—he felt positively exposed. If Hux noticed his lack of attire, he wasn't brave enough to say anything.

Kylo hardened his face into a blank expression. “I presume the assault was a resounding success? Do you have the girl?”

“The base was destroyed and abandoned, there was no sign the Resistance had been there,” Hux sneered, teeth bared. Kylo feared the general was already growing suspicious of his contradictory intentions regarding the Resistance. “My troops are combing the jungle now.”

Kylo chose a condescending demeanor to regain control. “Have you searched the temple?”

“What... you said nothing of a temple!” The remainder of the general's tirade was a series of spluttered curses and growls, focused on the other officers on the bridge as he shouted orders.

Kylo hummed thoughtfully to regain the general’s attention as his cutting words pushed the dagger in farther. “I assumed your men were capable of something other than high treason. If members of the Resistance were there, they've likely fled by now.” Hux’s eyes flashed to his in rage. As quickly as the anger had appeared, however, it faded. The general adjusted his clothes and cleared his throat. Kylo wouldn’t surrender his mission to agitate the general so easily. “Do you have anything to report that is not an overwhelming disappointment?”
“The Annihilator was successful in catching the filth of Nal Hutta off guard,” Hux answered neutrally. It irritated Kylo to no end that the man could compose himself with so little effort. “They could not confirm that all high-ranking individuals perished, but the majority of their kind were blown into space. It was message enough.”

The pinch in his brow betrayed his confusion. “You're certain they had not fled?”

“Yes, it was a success, Supreme Leader.”

It made no sense. Kylo had told Rey about the impending offensive strike in time to warn them, but she... hadn't. Did she not believe him? She wouldn't have allowed an entire species to be blasted out of the galaxy, would she?

“Good. I expect a full report,” he said, recovering his calm demeanor. “And I don't want to hear from you again, unless you have a positive update about the destruction of the Resistance” The words tasted like poison in his mouth. The warm feeling left over from his connection with Rey disappeared entirely.

“Oh, but my lord, I’m not finished,” Hux said with a taunting smile. “Your morale with the troops has suffered of late. It would boost their confidence in you to witness another of your flashy executions of our rebel prisoners. We can be patient while you…make yourself presentable.”

The general had cornered him. He couldn’t deny the opportunity, not when Hux could so easily use it against him. “Very well,” he said in resignation. “Gather the troops.” The hologram disappeared, and he suppressed the desire to throw something. Blue beeped at him quietly. He refused to look at the droid.

“I do have to kill them, Blue.”

He moved to the wardrobe to hide himself under layers of the Supreme Leader. After the incident, Kylo attempted to have more patience with the droid. He reminded himself that Blue was merely curious about a galaxy he didn’t yet understand, much as Kylo had once done as a child. He had promised to do better with answer the droid’s relentless questioning of "why," though he couldn’t promise Blue would like what he heard. But when Blue responded, it was not curiosity, it was defiance. The young droid was arguing with him. Kylo wouldn’t have tolerated it from a subordinate, but he did from a droid. It was irritating.
“Yes, I do,” he huffed as he deftly clasped his tunic to conceal his body from the others. No, not just his body. There was a man underneath that Blue was trying to reach, but Kylo couldn’t allow the others to see that man, lest they see his motives. When he spoke again heat laced in his words, but his heart was far more conflicted.

“Blue, I have to. End of discussion.” Kylo grabbed his boots and tried to ignore the droid, but Blue reverted back to his favorite question. Why? Kylo, ever the fool, answered him.

“Because I have no choice.” Blue wouldn’t understand, but it was true; Kylo didn’t have a choice. It was a chess match, and the move Blue was asking him to make would be too costly. Blue didn’t care about honesty and continued arguing with him obstinately.

“No, I don’t! Not if I want Rey to survive!”

The droid’s next question gave him pause, and Kylo dropped his boot to the floor. “Well, I’ll tell her…” But what could he tell her? He knew how it would hurt her; she would hate him, because the same loathing churned in his own gut. Her life, however, had and would always be more important than her hatred toward him. “It doesn’t matter what I’ll tell her.”

The droid’s response was less heated.

“Yes, I am, Blue. I am bad. In fact, I am the leader of all the bad people.” The droid had no idea how profoundly his next four words impacted Kylo. Rey’s face in the hut glowed in his mind. It isn’t too late… Then a face from his nightmares; Han, his visage etched by age and sorrow, stood across from him on the skyway. It’s too late, he had told his father, No, it’s not, his father had assured him. Then another face, from a time before he had become Kylo Ren, though just as consequential in his nightmares: Dev. I see the path before you, Ben, his friend had told him as he lay dying, Don’t choose this way; it’s not too late.”

“Damn it, Blue, I don’t have time for this,” he growled and moved to finish hiding himself under tunics and cloaks and masks… no, not masks. His mask was gone. He would be forced the face the First Order with only the practiced mask of impassivity that he knew would not conceal his conflict after he delivered those prisoner’s fates. He imagined Rey’s face when she asked him how many people he had killed.

Three hundred and nine.
She had taken the life of the Zabrak, so the toll remained at three hundred and nine – ending with the death of his mother. It should have ended there, but it would be even more soon. Could he look her in the eyes and tell her that after everything had changed between them… he did this?

I have to, I have no choice.

He grabbed his cloak more forcefully than necessary and began clapping it with jerking movements. When he finished, he glared at the droid, his tone heavy with finality. “Stay here.” Blue showed no intention of heeding his order, switching tactics as he argued with him. Kylo stormed past the non-compliant droid to the blastdoor.

“You’re not coming with me.”

Blue swiveled out of Kylo’s way, but his repeated question of "why" followed Kylo to the door. “Because I don’t want you there!”

Kylo could feel his agitation building— it was the last thing he needed if he was going to put on a performance for Hux and his men—but the droid had no intention of dropping the matter. He continued to demand answers. Kylo snapped. “Because I don’t want you to see me like that! I don’t want you to leave again!”

The droid didn’t recoil from his outburst as he feared. No, what Blue did was profoundly worse. He told Kylo he would stand by him when he did what he needed to do. The words hurt far more than he had ever thought possible, fracturing his resolve. When Kylo spoke again, his volatility had faded. “Fine, you want to see death at my hands? Be my guest.” Kylo nearly broke the control panel with his ferocity as he forced open the blastdoor. Blue was observant enough not to speak as he stormed down the corridor with the droid in tow.

Kylo’s stomach rolled as he remembered the last time he had been handed the task of executioner. If he had thought he was conflicted then, this was a whole new level of Hell. It wasn’t an outrageous request by his general, though he knew Hux made it with calculated intentions. If Kylo denied the request, it would be grounds to question him of his loyalty and efficacy as a leader. If Kylo carried through with the execution and had another… episode, it would be grounds for an examination by the psytechs to call into question his stability and capability as a leader. Either way, Hux had him cornered. They both knew it.

If he didn’t do it, Hux would likely garner more support for his cause. If there was a mutiny, Hux
had the loyalty of the troops. Without the clones, Kylo had no chance. He would be executed, or, worse, imprisoned and forced to sit idle as the First Order tracked down and destroyed the Resistance. Rey may have believed that other lives were no less important than hers, but he vehemently disagreed. He would destroy the entire galaxy to save her.

When he reached the hangar, the sight of the rows of troops was achingly familiar. It was an act that never bothered him before, but now? He hated it. All of it. He wanted more than anything to destroy it all; tear it all down and watch it burn. Years ago, months ago, even, he had felt nothing as he strode past them all, singularly focused on only one thing. He had pushed away his emotions until he was just carrying through with the motions. Somewhere along the way, it had changed, and he knew who the catalyst had been.

Walking past the rows of men and women, he wondered how many were like FN-2187. How many of those saluting him hated everything the Order stood for? How many felt like imposters, like they were trapped and there was no way out? How many felt like him? Hux was standing with his hands clasped behind his back, an irritating smile cutting across his face. Kylo was reliving a nightmare.

Kylo straightened his shoulders, lifted his chin, and slowed his stride to the determined, measured steps of a man like Kylo Ren. Though he was falling apart on the inside, he projected the appearance of a man worth their deference. He could feel himself struggling to hold up the guise of the man he could only pretend to be, but he only had to hold on for a few more minutes.

Blue rolled dutifully by his side, even as other BB units chided him for his differences, attempted to instigate an argument, or whispered about him like he was worth more as spare parts. Kylo wanted to run them all through with his lightsaber, but he knew it would only disappoint his droid. If he kicked one that rolled too close, well, that was entirely by accident.

Without a mask, Kylo had to focus more on hardening his face into impassivity. He kept his stare on his general until he was standing before the prisoners. The two prisoners were arranged on their knees, much as the others had been before. There were two females this time – Concordians – who had escaped the massacre on Concordia, but had been subsequently taken captive by the Mandalorians. From a quick skim of their minds, it was clear that they were guilty. No, more than guilty; they had been instrumental in nearly taking his life. The Force had granted him a reason to take their lives without remorse. They had put the blaster in the hands of the child and told him where to go, what to say, and who to aim for. They had nearly been successful in their attempt, and knowingly led that child to his death. He hated them for everything they represented. He could do this.

Kylo ignited his lightsaber as the darkness fed on his rage. These prisoners did not suffer quietly. The two women were screaming to each other in Mando’a, reaching for each other before the stormtroopers drove them further apart. The darkness inside him urged him to silence them. As he
stood before the first prisoner, her eyes lifted to his. Without a mask to hide behind, he was forced to stare right back. His grip tightened around the hilt as she held his stare, pleading with him for what he assumed was mercy.

There was zero reason for him to feel sympathetic toward these prisoners; neither of them looked similar to Rey, they weren’t members of the Resistance, and, to top it off, they had tried to kill him. It was everything he could have hoped for. And yet… he couldn’t bring himself to raise his blade. His stare shifted to the droid by his side, who looked up at him with silent support. He nearly laughed at himself. *I am the Supreme Leader of the known galaxy, but I’m too weak and foolish like …* He severed the thought before it could finish; he wouldn’t be a prisoner to the dead any longer.

The voice in his head, however, was his own. *It’s too late.* Those words… those words were convincing, but he knew they were not his. He knew the truth. *No, it’s not,* he reminded himself in a moment of clarity. *I don’t have to do this. I am the Supreme Leader. I obey no one.*

The crimson blade disappeared inside the hilt. Hux’s eyebrow lifted questioningly. “Supreme Leader? The charges have been read, if you would —”

“No.”

“No?”

“I read their minds with the Force,” he said, staring into the eyes of the woman at his feet. “They are not guilty of the crimes of which they are accused. They took no part in the attack on Mandalore, nor the attack against our troops. Release them immediately.”

Hux shot forward from his position beside the stormtroopers. He stepped close enough that Kylo could hear the breath hissing through his teeth. Lowering his voice to a harsh whisper, Hux argued, “My lord, we cannot in good faith release the prisoners.”

“We cannot in good faith take innocent lives, either,” Kylo replied evenly, and he found that it wasn’t a composure he had to counterfeit. His emotions were surprisingly calm.

“Ren…”
Kylo shifted his attention to the stormtroopers holding the two women on their knees. “Release the prisoners.”

He chewed his lip to disguise a grin as the stormtroopers immediately obeyed his order without a single glance toward the general. Looking down at Blue, he nodded in the direction of his chambers, and the droid immediately followed. “Drop them at the nearest ecumenopolis,” he said over his shoulder.
Chapter End Notes

Threat of violence
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Their search of the hidden compartments had been successful, and Rey and Rose had been working in companionable silence – fixing what they could of the lightsaber – when the ship had lurched out of hyperspace. It was an unplanned stop, so either the ship was broken or they needed to change course. Rey feared to know what could have required a change in course. An attack on Dantooine? Pirates? A mutiny within the First Order? She had felt Kylo’s emotions reach a near breaking point earlier over the bond, but that wasn’t necessarily uncommon. She hadn’t felt terror, and if there was a mutiny, she would have felt terror, wouldn’t she? She checked the bond, and was relieved to find his strong energy there. Her rationalizations did little to soothe her, however, when she felt ominous tremors in the Force.

“Why do you think we dropped out of hyperspace?” she asked Rose softly. She refused to glance up at her friend, but Rose must have noticed her stricken expression, because she carefully set the weapon the workbench. Her friend waited patiently for her to continue. “If there was an attack on Dantooine, do you think – ”

“I think Finn would already have us back in hyperspace on a plotted course to the base. I think you know that, too,” Rose reassured her, but there was a question in her eyes when Rey met her stare. She was waiting for Rey to ask the true question plaguing her thoughts.

“What do you think he would do if there was news of a mutiny within the First Order?” Rey forced the words past her lips, giving life to her fears, hoping Rose would reassure her again. She didn’t. “I felt him, earlier. He was very upset and I thought… but what if he…”

“Come one,” Rose said, offering her oil-stained hand to her friend. “Let’s go talk to Finn.” Rey grasped her fingers tightly and followed Rose toward the cockpit. He’s alive, she reminded herself. It’s never too late as long as he’s alive. Her inner assurances were interrupted when she heard a noise from the galley. The Force was drawing her attention there. She released her friend’s hand and stopped. Rose glanced back at her, hesitating, before Rey gestured toward the refresher. When her friend disappeared around the corner, Rey backtracked until she was standing at the entrance of the galley. Why had the Force drawn her there? She had been expecting her bondmate, but she found herself staring at none other than Poe Dameron. He was standing at the counter, preparing himself a cup of caf or tea.

“What are you doing here?”

Poe nearly dropped the utensil he was using to stir the drink. He recovered quickly and continued his process without facing her. “Finn didn’t tell you?” Poe asked, the inflection of his voice was suspiciously high. “I was in the area: I had to drop off a… package with Maz, so I wanted to rendezvous with you all before you head to Ilum.”
Rey scoffed and muttered, “I didn’t know Kamino was ‘in the area.’”

“So you’ve talked to your Supreme Leader boyfriend, huh?” Her heartbeat quickened as she realized her mistake, but before her thoughts could spiral, he smirked over his shoulder. “Is he pissed?” There was a building uneasiness that prickled along her skin. It wasn’t the fact that Poe knew she had seen Kylo again after the incident in the war room that concerned her – he knew they were bonded – but because he was joking about it. This was the man who had pretended to murder her to realize his revenge against the Supreme Leader. When she didn’t answer, he turned to face her, wiping his hands with a towel. “Sorry, I’m just in a good mood after destroying the threat of an entire army that could kill the people I care about. You understand that, don’t you?”

She nodded. Slowly.

Poe took a sip from the steaming cup of what she assumed was tea. “So… after everything he’s done,” he said, tapping his temple to allude to the torture inflicted by her bondmate, “you can give me this satisfaction, can’t you? Is he pissed?”

“Yes, he is,” she admitted, watching his reaction carefully. His smile seemed genuine, so she crossed her arms. “Naturally, Ben believed I did it.” It was a risk – saying his name – but she wanted to know whether Poe’s friendliness was a façade. What she hadn’t expected was Poe not reacting to the name at all.

He shrugged by way of apology and lifted another cup from the counter. “Truce?” he asked. The look he gave her reminded her of when Plutt sold off-worlders a “good deal” on his old junk. Rey knew she was likely overreacting. After what he had done, it would be difficult for her to trust him again. She believed it was with good cause. The last time she had seen Poe, he had accused her of swearing loyalty to the Supreme Leader. He had forced her hand, demanding she give him the vial in good faith. But then he used it, knowing Kylo had entrusted her with it. The last time she saw him, he had revealed his plan of drawing her bondmate into a trap. She would never trust him again, but all he was asking for was a truce. It was exactly what she needed if she had any hope of convincing them to spare Kylo’s life.

Still, her scavenger caution begged her to tread cautiously. “What changed? I thought you didn’t trust me?”

Poe nodded as if he had expected that question. “Destroying those clones put everything into perspective for me,” he said. Everything about his words seemed sincere. “You told the truth, about the clones, the vial, all of it, so I realized that the only reasonable explanation is you were telling the truth about everything else. If it wouldn’t have been for you willingly giving us that information, I would have had no idea they existed. We need you to win this war, Rey; your information on the Supreme Leader that you are gathering during your missions could be vital, and
his trust in you could be what we need to eventually draw him into a trap if those negotiations you mentioned don’t go as planned. I’ve decided to trust you...” he extended his arm to offer her the tea. “Will you trust me? Honestly, all I’ve ever wanted was to do what was necessary to win the war my parents sacrificed everything for, what Luke and Leia sacrificed everything for. You understand that, don’t you?"

When she looked in his eyes as he finished, she skimmed his energy, searching for the truth of his words. The truth was all she found. She had known that about him all along; it was why Leia had put her faith in him to lead them. He would do anything for the survival of the Resistance. Leia trusted him; that had to mean something. Rose had proven to her that she didn’t have to struggle alone in secrecy with her bond to Kylo. It had put them at odds before, but it didn’t have to.

She did understand that he ultimately had the best interests of the Resistance at heart, even if she vehemently disagreed with his methods. Rey had always been forgiving. If she forgave Kylo, what kind of person would she be not to forgive Poe? Even if she wasn’t ready to forgive him, a truce would benefit them all. Poe believed her. As long as he believed Kylo was only a mission to her, they were safe. Poe could help her turn Kylo, save him, if he realized it would help the Resistance win the war.

Rey nodded as she withheld a sigh of relief. She accepted the proffered cup, sipping it slowly as she carefully selected her words. “Truce,” she said with a soft smile. She wouldn’t trust him, not yet, and she wouldn’t give him anything that could further hurt her bondmate. But they could work together to end the war.

“Do you think if you went to him,” he murmured, “you could convince him of a truce?”

Rey bit her lip in thought, then took another sip of her tea. The trust between them had been weakened, but after he healed her, after he offered to teach her, Rey had hope that the bond was finally changing for the good. She had hope, but explaining that to Poe would require her to reveal intimacies about their bond that she refused to admit to Poe. “I don’t know,” she said instead. “His trust in me was broken after Kamino.”

Poe didn’t seem discouraged, as if he’d expected that reaction. Perhaps, he had. “Maybe I can help if I talk to him,” he offered, smiling as she took another sip. “Or Finn can do it, if you don’t trust me. If he explains that I gave you no other choice, then Ben will know you didn’t betray him.”

He said his name.

It was difficult not to be charmed by Poe’s easy explanation, but after he ordered her to kiss him in
front of her bondmate, she wasn’t keen to allow them in the same room together: not yet. But if she
spoke to Kylo, perhaps they could find a way to work together. Comlinks were safe. Or
holoprojectors. If she could convince her bondmate to put aside his hatred for Poe – which was
arguably a monumental task – then perhaps they could all work together to destroy Force Destiny.
She had felt so hopeless before, being pulled two different ways, but she could see it now—how
they could win.

But Rey needed time – the right moment – to convince Kylo of her plan. How long would Poe wait
before he tried to arrange it on his own? She needed something to distract him long enough to talk
to her bondmate. She considered telling him about Force Destiny and couldn’t find a good enough
reason not to. Kylo wouldn’t be pleased, but it affected more than her and Kylo. The entire galaxy
was at risk. What if he fell to mutiny? Wouldn’t he want the Resistance to have a chance against
the Dark Army? It was her duty to warn the Resistance, and with Poe distracted in formulating a
plan to destroy the machine, she would have the time she needed. “After Kamino and what
happened in the war room,” she said, “I couldn’t get him here with you right now if I promised him
the entire galaxy. But he needs our help. The First Order is developing a weapon, Force Destiny, a
dark side machine that can bring back the dead. Kylo discovered that Snoke was incarnated by the
soul of Darth Sidious, the creature who ruined his grandfather’s life. Sidious is planning to create
an army of dark side users to control the galaxy. You said the enemy of our enemy is our ally. If
we destroy the Force Destiny together, then he’ll have no reason to stay at the First Order.”

There was a change in his expression that concerned her. She had never seen the man look at her
like that. She didn’t know what emotion it was, but she knew it wasn’t good. The curl of his fingers
around her shoulder was strong, and as he jerked her in his agitation, her tea sloshed and spilled
over the sides of the cup. “Rey, is this thing operational? How long have you known? Where is it?”

“I don’t think it’s operational yet, at least I hope not,” she said, backing out of his grasp. “But I just
learned about it right before Kylo discovered what you did on Kamino. I don’t know a lot, and I
don’t think he does either, only that he’s trying to find ways to destroy it. He found a holocron at
his grandfather’s castle –”

Poe’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “He told you a dark side holocron from Darth Vader’s castle is
supposed to stop this thing? Why can’t he destroy it? He’s the Supreme Leader.”

Rey bit her lip as she carefully chose her words. They had only just established a truce. If Poe lost
his trust in her again, or Kylo, they could lose their only change to end this war together. “He says
that’s the only way to destroy the machine. I do know it’s on the Finalizer with him, but he needs
help. His general doesn’t trust him, and he would face mutiny before he could destroy it on his
own. He said he’s on ‘borrowed time.’”

Poe considered her answer for a moment before nodding. “And this is why he says he hasn’t
turned?”
“Yes,” she sighed, as the relief settled the tension in her shoulders. “What can we do to help him? You could send me there; I could pretend to join him, or I could find a way onto that destroyer. Maybe Finn knows a way—”

“No,” he cut in, “wait until after Ilum. Get your weapon working, then we have a chance to take out this machine. Together.” His smile was bright and his tone comforting. “Okay?” He only wanted what was best for the galaxy and now there was a chance they could have that without losing Kylo. She wanted desperately to trust him.

“Okay,” she agreed. “But please, don’t do anything to break his trust in me again,” she said, searching his eyes. “Please.”

“I won’t,” he said, everything about him was screaming of honesty. “Winning this war is dependent upon him trusting you right now.” His words should have been reassuring; everything else about him was reassuring. Rey couldn’t understand why trepidation tingled down her spine. She blamed it on her time spent on Jakku, trusting no one. She blamed on the past that she still hadn’t forgiven.

*I will be careful*, she promised herself. *I’ll find a way for us to work together, but no matter what, I’ll keep Ben safe from you.*

Raising her cup in acknowledgment, she suppressed the warning inside her. Except the warning wasn’t fading. Then she felt the shudder in the Force, and she knew.

*Rey…* his voice echoed across her consciousness.

“I have to go,” she said hastily, then followed the corridor until she had reached the safety of the quarters they had transformed into another storage compartment. It was piled high with boxes of equipment, but it had enough walking room to fit her and her… visitor. Shutting the blastdoor behind her, she turned to find the—now fully clothed—Kylo in all of his Supreme Leader regalia. She should have found it agitating – to see him dressed like that again – especially when she needed to convince him to accept help from the Resistance. There was something different in his energy, however, something that hadn’t been there previously.

Before she could further contemplate it, her attention was drawn elsewhere, because he was *smiling*. “It worked.”
She blinked.

“Ben?”

The first words out of his mouth were, “Do you speak Mando’a?”

Rey could only stare at him in confusion. He was smiling, and he wanted to talk about languages? “Enough to get me by, I suppose, why?”

Kylo, however, was singularly focused. “I know we said we didn’t want to use the bond this way, but I was hoping you’d let me…” He tapped his temple to intimate what he was asking. To say Rey was dumbfounded was an understatement; she was floored.

“You want knowledge from me?” she asked. He nodded slowly. “From me?” She couldn’t help it; it had always been her using the bond for his skills. “You’re Supreme Leader, you have access to translation droids. Why?”

“Well, I…” Kylo hesitated, his brows pinched in confusion. “You speak and understand Mando’a; I don’t. With the bond, I thought—”

It was a statement more than a question. “You want my help?”

Kylo nodded again. His eyes were warm and he still had the shadow of a grin on his lips. But it was his energy, she decided, that drew her attention. He was still a storm of emotions, but it was brighter. When she searched his eyes, she found… something undeniably similar to hope. The corners of his eyes crinkled. “I remember you saying something about helping me once.”

It was Rey’s turn to smile. This was the man she was fighting to save. He was a different man than who she thought he was when they first met. “You can take it if you want,” she said. Kylo snorted, reaching his hand forward. Rey reminisced further about their first interactions; when he knew more about her than she did, and neither of them knew the real him.

Do you see it, Ben? Do you see how far we’ve come?
It was a strange feeling, but it didn’t hurt as she expected. The months of meticulously studying the language with her scavenged computer display flashed before her eyes in seconds. He nodded in appreciation when he was done.

Her smile widened. “Are you going to tell me now what you need it for?”

Kylo was still singularly focused – now on their connection – that he neglected to answer her question. “I found you just by calling you in the bond. We could use it to our advantage if I –”

“Is that why you were smiling?”

“Yes, and no,” he said, glancing down at the droid next to him. “I was in a good mood. I met Hux’s challenge and defeated him at his own game.”

“And the Mando’a?” she prompted, hoping that his need for the skill was proof that she had reason to have hope. He hadn’t needed the language when he contended with the Concordians; why was it important now? Did it have anything to do with the change she felt in him?

He shrugged. “For prisoners.”

Blue, who had thus far listened quietly at his side, piped up in chipper binary. Kylo glared at the droid as he sang his master’s praise.

“Ben…” Her eyes found his in shock. If it was true, it could change everything. “Is it true? You didn’t execute those prisoners?”

His eyes trailed back to the Blue, narrowing in irritation. “I know I said you don’t have to obey my orders,” he huffed to the droid in a low voice, “But when I said, ‘do me a favor and don’t mention this to anyone,’ *that* is not what I meant.”

The droid hummed ruefully in binary, his magnetic casters whirring as he lowered his domed head in shame. Kylo made his best attempt to look contrite. “Blue….”
“What Ben was about to say, Blue,” Rey interjected cheerfully, “is he wants you to continue with your very interesting story.”

The droid immediately straightened, whistling excitedly as he relayed the events surrounding the Supreme Leader’s decision to spare the prisoners. Rey wasn’t looking at him, but she could practically feel Kylo roll his eyes over the bond. She couldn’t bring herself to care. Ever since she was witness to his memories, Rey had been patient, finally understanding that, if it had taken him years to fall, he couldn’t rise to the light again overnight. But he was rising to the light again. This proved it.

She couldn’t help the smile that warmed her cheeks. Kylo had gained nothing by keeping the prisoners alive. He certainly hadn’t done it for her; he hadn’t wanted her to know. No, Kylo had no reason to save the women who had tried to kill him, yet… he did. What’s more, he wanted to know their language so he could face them. The fallen Jedi had done the right thing for the sole reason that he wanted to. As her smile grew, so did the hope in her heart.

Rey lifted her eyes from the excited droid to her bondmate. She wanted to tell him how proud she was of him, how profoundly his choice affected her, how deeply she believed in him, but she knew he could feel it all over the bond in a way she could never express. Instead of the thousands of thoughts that burned in her mind, she simply smiled.

His eyes smiled back. It meant more to her than a thousand words ever could.

Rey was cautiously optimistic. Realistically, she knew that progress with Kylo was one step forward and two steps back. To anyone outside the bond, the progress was inconsequential in the grand scheme of what he had done. Kylo hadn’t forsaken his title, defected from the First Order, or joined the Resistance, but Rey knew that this was a significant step for him. The path he was walking ended with his return to the light; she believed that. The only obstacle standing in his way was time.

*Force Destiny* would be completed soon, and, after he spared those prisoners' lives, mutiny was drawing closer. With the new information, Poe would likely soon develop a plan to help Kylo destroy the machine before the Dark Army was reincarnated. She knew she had to fix her lightsaber before she could help them. Time was something they simply didn’t have. If she could reach Ilum, fix her lightsaber, and convince Poe to send her to Kylo on the *Finalizer*, then she would cross the galaxy for him again. He had still been deeply immersed in darkness last time, yet he had saved her. If she went to him this time, she would trust in the Force that he was ready to do the right thing. It wasn’t ideal, but it could likely be their only hope.

She couldn’t help when she asked him, “Ben, what if the Resistance helps you destroy *Force Destiny*?”
His smile dropped slightly, but didn’t disappear entirely. “We can’t trust them, Rey, you know that.”

“We don’t need to trust them,” she insisted, studying his eyes for a glint of something other than defiance. There was something – something bright – that flashed in his stare.

“I think I have a plan,” he admitted. “I have summoned the other Knights.”

Rey smiled. Kylo had the holocron, Jacen and the others would help him. They would certainly deter a mutiny while he learned how to destroy the machine. On one hand, she feared the darksiders influence on him, but she knew they had all followed the same path Kylo had. They could be saved. If they responded to his call for help, she had to believe they would help him do the right thing, that they would help him continue to do the right thing after the machine was destroyed. “Does that mean you’ve made plans for… after, too?”

“Rey…” he warned with a sigh. She wasn’t disappointed by his response, not this time. She knew the strength of denial better than anyone. That didn’t mean she wouldn’t try. Kylo typically reacted with irritation when she mentioned defecting, but he surprised her with humor instead. “Could you imagine what Dameron would do if I showed up at the Resistance?”

She giggled, imagining the look on Poe’s face if Kylo sauntered onto a Resistance base. “Yeah… he’d probably poison your food.”

Kylo smirked as he turned to study the room. Save for a small walking path and the desk and chair she used to fiddle aimlessly with her broken lightsaber, the room was filled with boxes. He eyed the boxes stacked to the ceiling on each wall carefully. Rey knew there wasn’t anything important in them, and Kylo wouldn’t use the information against her even if there was. “Do they even serve food to Resistance prisoners?”

It was true, of course, that he wouldn’t have been allowed to walk freely onto a Resistance base. He would be taken into custody, tortured, and imprisoned. Was that what she hoped for him? It bothered her more than she cared to admit. She reminded herself that he would suffer a far worse fate if he didn’t leave. “I doubt they feed prisoners in the First Order.”

“Oh, absolutely not,” he huffed with mirth, tilting a box to view its contents before venturing deeper into the room. “Then they’d do undesirable things like survive.”
Rey followed him, curious about what he was looking for. “So if you had to choose a place to risk imprisonment, you’d choose the Resistance?”

“No, I’d pick the Order,” he said, reaching his hand up to run his fingers over a dent in a box. “Swifter death.”

She snorted derisively. “That’s the most valid reason I’ve heard for staying, yet.” He turned, and his eyes brightened at the sarcastic inflection in her voice. She could almost feel the smile in his emotions. There was something about his energy that made her stomach flutter, but when she spoke again, he slowly moved to the entrance of the room to put space between them. “You don’t have to join the Resistance to leave the First Order. So, other than the excellent hospitality toward its prisoners, why don’t you leave after I help you destroy this machine? The Resistance will be safe, the Dark Army will stay dead, you have no other reason to stay. I know you’re lonely there.”

Kylo turned as she approached, never breaking eye contact. It did nothing but intensify the flutter in her stomach as the Force drew her to him. When she stepped close enough to be enveloped by his powerful energy, she hesitated. The Force was still calling her to step closer, to touch him, to feel him. His piercing gaze stopped her from taking that last step. He may have been fully dressed, but she was close enough to feel the heat radiating off of him. There was something dark like desire in his eyes, and she had no doubt he would return her advances, but there was a warning there, too. Was she prepared to irrevocably change the bond between them? If he never turned, would she regret this? His breathing was shallow and his fingers twitched in anticipation as he studied her. She waited for him to close the distance instead, to make the decision for her, but after searching her eyes, he took a step back. Then he turned, and began wandering the room again, as if that charged moment between them had never happened. “Loneliness…” he said, his voice low. “I can handle loneliness.”

Rey would not be so easily deterred. “What about love and happiness? You can’t find that at the First Order.” His fingers traced aimlessly along the edge of a nearby table. His eyes had lost their brightness as he followed the line his fingers created. It was his way of avoiding her question, she knew that well enough by now, but she waited. If she was patient, he would have to say something eventually. Centering her teacup on the table, he drew his fingers through the streaks of condensation left behind.

His next words were more serious. “I’m not capable of love; I don’t want it. It’s safer to be feared than to be loved.”

“Not everyone will hurt you, Ben,” she murmured, sliding her hand across the table to touch his, “but, fine, let’s start with happiness.”
Kylo stared down at their intertwined fingers. When he spoke, his voice was barely more than a whisper. “Happiness terrifies me.”

“Why in all the stars in the galaxy would happiness terrify you, Ben?” she asked, trying her best to conceal the humor in her voice. She failed miserably.

Kylo studied her for a moment, as if he was considering whether or not to give her an honest answer. He slumped down into the chair, pulling his hand from hers and resting his elbows on his knees. When his eyes met hers, the fearful vulnerability of his gaze made him look impossibly young. “I’m always alone,” he said, and she had the good sense not argue with him. She knew if she was patient, he just might give her valuable insight into his thoughts. “For the most part, I’ve always been alone. Loneliness is static, it’s safe; it can last forever. Happiness can’t.” He shook his head, dropping his stare to the floor. He struggled with the vulnerability; she could feel him withdrawing in on himself. After years under Sidious, it was as if he was fearful or ashamed to speak without filtering out emotional thoughts.

Let me in, Ben, please. She tried. She knew he had thousands of thoughts running through his head that he didn’t say aloud. Perhaps it would be easier just to allow her access to them. She smiled when he responded.

*Think of the most amazing fruit in the galaxy*, his voice rumbled across the bond. *What would you do if I told you that you could try one bite, but then you could never have it again? Would you want to know something beautiful, but fleeting? Would it be worth it to taste joy for one moment, only to have it taken away? The rest of your life would be spent yearning for another taste of something that you know you’re missing.*

*I would choose the fruit*, she replied. *I “lived” the majority of my life without experiencing the beauty life has to offer. If I only get to take one bite, see one rainstorm, hear one song, smell one flower, feel one fleeting moment of love, then it would be worth it, because at least I lived.*

*I can’t do it. I’m not strong enough. It’s easier to have no one; then you don’t have to face the pain when they get in their ship and fly away.*

*What if you found someone who wouldn’t fly away?*

*They always do.*
Rey’s eyes welled with tears as she read the truth on his face. What could she say? Even she had flown away from him. Three times. She bit her lip to hide its quiver. “You deserve to be happy, Ben. Even alone is better than the First Order.” Kylo was silent, working his jaw as he stared down at his hands. She decided to let him have a moment, so she turned to the mirrored surface of the door, distracting herself with the reflection staring back at her.

It wasn’t often that she looked at her own reflection. She never had a reason to on Jakku, nor did she even possess a mirror. Obviously, she had seen herself before in other reflective surfaces and mirrors sold in the marketplace, but the image staring back at her never meant anything to her. If she hadn’t been wholeheartedly convinced that her parents would come back to her, she wouldn’t have even bothered with her hair. She had thought of removing it all in practicality more than once. It had never been important what others saw when they looked at her.

Since leaving Jakku, that had changed. When basic survival was no longer an immediate concern, people tended to behave differently than she was accustomed to. Rey had bathed once a week, outside, when she lived in the AT-AT. The first time she tried to strip down in the galley of the Millennium Falcon to clean herself after witnessing Chewbacca washing his paws, the Wookiee had to explain to her about refreshers and modesty.

Beholding Kylo sans tunic had been the first time she had felt uncomfortable viewing another in a state of undress, though she had refused at the time to admit to herself why. It was the way his eyes had devoured her that had first encouraged her to look at herself and see how others viewed her.

Witnessing his memories, she had been given insight into how others viewed the galaxy around them. She had experienced his deprecating thoughts toward his own features, but she was also granted insight into his views of others. In his memories, he viewed her in a positive light, but it mostly centered on her ferocity or strength. He had also acknowledged the classical beauty of Jaina and Alema. Rey had truly studied herself in the mirror for the first time after that. With her new insights, she had begun studying others. She loved the shape of Rose’s sparkling eyes, Finn’s bright, captivating smile, and Poe’s thick, curly hair that always looked perfect—not to mention everything about her bondmate. His features had every bit the strength of a warrior, but also the regality of a prince.

What did she have to offer?

Studying herself in the mirror now, Rey wondered if she was too plain. She lacked curves and perfectly combed hair or a striking eye color. Her face looked like a warrior, nothing like the memories of the soft-featured women she had witnessed through Kylo. She tried to soften her features and wondered if she should experiment again with the beauty products she had discovered on the Falcon before finding Kylo on the Supremacy. Chewbacca had said she looked “pretty”—complete with an insinuating inflection—after she had done that. As she considered it, she fussed with the stray hairs that had pulled out of her braid during their fight on Mustafar, trying with
futility to smooth them down.

“Do you want me to fix it – the braid?”

Rey startled at the deep timbre of his voice. She spun to face him, but his stare was still focused on his hands. If her mind had been clouded with darkness, she might have focused on his desire to fix her, to make her better than she was. But instead, she smiled. Her fears of inadequacy melted away when she felt his nervous energy. Rey recognized the overture for its importance to him. This meant far more to her than a physical connection. Without a word, she sat in front of his chair, as she had with Leia, her hands timid and uncertain as she placed her hair behind her shoulders.

Kylo released a breath—a tight, broken hiss of air through his teeth—and she realized he was just as anxious. It was reassuring that he felt it, too. “You should… you should take the other braid out first.”

Rey could have said many things—“I don’t know how,” or “it would be easier if you did,” or “I don’t mind,” but she knew the cultural significance, she craved to feel that intimacy… with him. Perhaps that was why she whispered, “I want you to do it.”

“I don’t think you understand; in Alderaanian customs, it means more than—”

“I know,” she interjected abruptly. Kylo knew she wasn’t ignorant of the customs. He had told her of how his father removed the braids from his mother’s hair every night. They both knew what it meant, but he was still trying to give her a chance to avoid something she could regret. Did he want to? Would he regret it? She would have been too fearful to ask before, but he had mentioned it in their dream. It was something he imagined he would do if he was free of the First Order. It was something he still could do if he freed himself from the First Order.

Swallowing her fears, she forced herself to find courage. “I know what it means,” she said. “And I want you to.” Her words settled over them like a lightning storm. All she could hear were his heavy breaths cutting through the silence. Her anxiety increased with the void of words between them until she couldn’t take it anymore. “Unless, you don’t want to, then—”

“I do,” he said hastily, before softening his voice to a murmur, “I do.” It was a moment before his fingers first touched her hair, tentatively removing the first pin. As he continued removing each pin, and each lock of hair fell free, Rey couldn’t help but feel as if she were baring a part of herself to him. In a way, she was. He had never seen her with her hair down before. Her hair had become her own mask – an accessory to her denial of the past. Revealing herself to him in a way not even of her friends had seen was the physical embodiment of what she had bared to him in their
Rey couldn’t help the tremor that traveled through her when he released a shuddered breath as the last pin freed her hair to fall loose around her shoulders. The air around them felt charged, and Rey feared it would reopen old wounds for him. His hands still hovered between them, and she was prepared to give him an excuse to stop—perhaps she would suggest that she wanted to leave her hair down—but then he finally touched her again.

It was tentative at first, but then he began carding his fingers through her hair to remove the tangles. It was intimate in a way Rey hadn’t considered it would be. She understood now why it was meant as a display of trust and affection, more than she had when Leia had done it. Not that it hadn’t meant something to her then, too, but that was more focused on her past. This was different; this felt like the closest she would ever feel to being loved. After he had combed through her strands, his well-practiced fingers created sections of hair at her left temple, and then he began weaving it with skillful ease. It quickly became clear that his deft precision had been earned with experience. He couldn’t forget that familiarity any more than he could forget his mother. Each slide of his fingers was careful, each pull was gentle, each drag of his nails against her scalp ignited nerve endings she didn’t know she had. For a moment, she felt… treasured.

There was something entirely destabilizing to surrender a part of herself to him, but she had never felt as warm, safe, and cared for as she did at that moment. He didn’t speak as Leia had; his concentration focused fully on the glide of his fingers through her hair. Without the distraction of words, all she could focus on was him. It would have made her feel ridiculous how profoundly she savored his touch had she not felt warmth through the bond that mirrored her own. This… this is what they could be if there was no war tearing us apart. In no time at all, he had collected all her hair to weave it into a single braid.

“Don’t be afraid,” he whispered, as the crackle of his lightsaber shattered the silent peace. In a few seconds, it had been extinguished. He secured her hair with a tie rather than the pins Leia had placed. When she glanced down at the red tie, she noticed the silky texture of the material was very similar to….

A warmth bloomed inside her. “Did you cut this from your cloak?”

“I didn’t have anything else,” he responded with an uneasiness to his tone.

“It’s perfect.” There was something exhilarating in the fact that he had given her a piece of himself to keep with her. It may have been a sliver of fabric, but it meant more to her than he would know. Rey slid her fingers carefully over her hair to feel the braid. It started at her left temple, moving diagonally down her head. The braid ended over her right shoulder. Looking down at the braid itself, she noticed that the larger braid had three tiny braids woven into it. It was delicate, yet
striking. Rey had never seen her hair arranged so elegantly. Dragging her eyes from the braid in her hands, she turned to him. “Ben, it’s beautiful. What does it mean?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “Nothing?” Realizing the implication of his words, he stumbled over his following words. “I didn’t mean nothing, I just meant...” He sighed, staring at her helplessly. She bit back a smile. “Anything? Everything? There wasn’t one good enough, so I created one. I wanted you to have something that was just...you.”

Rey launched herself at him, and he stood instinctively. When he realized her intentions as she wrapped her arms around him, he huffed a soft chuckle and held her to him with his arm. “I love it, Ben,” she whispered. “It’s so pretty, and you made it for me, and you put a piece of your cloak in it and—”

His breath tickled her ear when he spoke. “What is it with you and your obsession with my clothes?”

There was a beaming light over the bond, and she realized he was smiling, if not physically, then in his soul. Her heart fluttered imagining it. It brought a smile to her own cheeks as she responded. “In my defense, you gave me your cloak first.”

Kylo hummed. She could feel the rumble of it against her chest. “What about the tunic you wore under your wraps on the Supremacy?”

“I knew that had to be yours!” she laughed. “I found it on the Falcon.”

“I left it there before...”

Rey could feel the sudden change in him; the darkness that cast a shadow over the warmth she had felt from him. Before. Would there ever come a time that "before" didn’t hurt him? Would he ever forgive them? Would he ever forgive himself?

Not as long as he stays with the First Order, she decided. Rey closed her eyes and breathed him in. The familiarity of it all was comforting. He would leave, one day, and she would be by his side when he did. The happiness and hope that flooded inside her fed the light that warmed her. She couldn’t help but smile against him when she felt the light radiate through the bond. He felt it, too, and allowed it in.
“Everything will be okay once he leaves.”

“What would I do if I left?” Rey jolted at his impromptu admission, releasing him. As her feet slid down to the floor, she studied him. His eyes were sincere. Was this the chance she had been begging for?

“Whatever you wanted,” she said, voice wavering. “Be a pilot and fly wherever you want. Or see the galaxy and write about it. Go on adventures, free slaves, destroy spice mines… I don’t know, whatever you wanted. I could… I could go with you. You could braid my hair every day like you said in the dream. Or… you could just go be alone for a while; figure out who you want to be.”

“The galaxy would never stop looking for me, Rey,” he said in a way that suggested he wanted her to prove him wrong. “Not after what I’ve done.”

“You could go to the Outer Rim or the Unknown Regions or the Wilds. You could be a pilot. I’m sure that man Lando would help…”

His voice was barely more than a whisper, but it didn’t conceal the torment. “I can’t … I can’t think of a way I make it off this destroyer, Rey. I don’t know if there will an after. I have to focus on destroying Force Destiny. That’s all that matters.”

“But if there is an after?” she pressed, hope bright in her heart. “Have you thought about it?”

She could feel the shadow of darkness cloud his side of the bond. Rey was an expert in what the darkness brought with it: doubt and denial. “You heard Maul,” he said. “It’s not only the First Order. If Sidious returns, we’re facing an entire army of Sith. No one survives if he manages that. How am I supposed imagine an after when I’m facing that?”

Rey knew she was no match for the darkness, but he was so close, and she was never one to give up without a fight. This could be how they formed an alliance and took one step closer to his salvation. “Sidious doesn’t have to return. That’s why you need help! If we told the Resistance, we could help you destroy the First Order and that machine from the inside.”

“No.”

“Well, why not?” Rey didn’t tell him that she had already told Poe about Force Destiny. She knew
he would be angry, and she decided he could be angry all he wanted—*after* they had destroyed the machine and stopped the dark side army from being created. She and Kylo were strong, but he was right, they would be no match against an army of the most powerful and skilled Sith that had ever lived. Kylo needed their help, even if he didn’t realize it yet.

“Maybe I deserve to fall with it all,” he whispered. “I helped create this.”

She nearly growled her words as they passed through her teeth. “You *do not* deserve that.”

Kylo sighed. “Why won’t you let me do this on my own?”

“Why won’t you let me help you? I love y—”

“Stop saying that!” he shouted, louder than necessary, and pushed away from her.

Rey never knew which words would push him over the edge, but lately, it was his resentment of those three words. It hurt that his first reaction to her love was revulsion, but she wouldn’t lie about her feelings. “Damn it, Ben, why? It’s the truth.”

“You don’t mean that,” he insisted as he paced across the floor in agitation. “You *can’t* mean that.”

His fear and self-loathing trickled through the bond with his darkness. The words from his memories repeated through her head.

*They don’t want you... They don’t love you... No one could ever love you...They all hate you...You can see it in their eyes...You are a burden... A monster to be feared...You will never be good enough for them...*

It struck her then—this wasn’t about his revulsion to her at all. “You're afraid,” she realized. “You think you're not good enough to be loved.”

Kylo shook his head, refusing to look at her as he paced. “I know I'm not good enough.”
“Isn’t that for me to decide?” she said, grabbing his arm to stop him. When his eyes finally raised to her, she could see the pain in them.

“No one could love me… I’m impossible to love.”

This time, her own words echoed across her memories. *I will free the galaxy of a monster and they will thank me, because everyone hates you! The galaxy hates you! Your mother hates you! I hate you! I could never care about a man like you! No one could! You’re impossible to love!*

*It doesn’t matter what you say, I don’t believe you. Your words mean nothing to me. I could never love someone like you*

“That was the darkness, Ben.” Rey wished she could tell him the lies that Sidious had convinced her of, because he had convinced her bondmate of them as well. But if she told Kylo about the whisper in the darkness—that those horrible thoughts were not entirely her own—then he would never be free of the monster who tormented him. “I was angry with you, and I said things that weren’t true,” she said instead. “Please don’t believe those things…”

Kylo stared down at her hand on his arm. “But it is the truth. No one ever loved me, Rey; no one will ever love me. The darkness and the light will always be at war inside me; I’ll always be a burden. I’m worthless. I don’t deserve love. I don’t deserve anything good. Because I’m not good, I’ll never be good. I am—”

“You know what? This is exactly why you can’t face Sidious alone, because, if you believe that, then he’s already won. If his lies are still in your head now, what do you think will happen when he’s alive again?” She pleaded with him to see the truth. “You are good. You just saved those prisoners’ lives, because you knew it was the right thing to do. But you’re right; you don’t deserve me.” Her last words brought his attention back to her. “Not until you leave the First Order for good. I made you a promise that I would wait for you, Ben Solo, and I intend to keep that promise.”

Even though he tried to suppress it, she saw the hope in his eyes. “So stay,” she continued. “Convince yourself that the lies that monster told you were true. Convince yourself that you’re a burden, even though you’re helping me through my darkness. Convince yourself you’re bad, even though you saved my friends when you could have let them die. Convince yourself that you’re not wanted, even though I’m standing here begging you to come home. And convince yourself you’re not loved, even though I love you. But when you say you’re worthless, then you believe I am, too.”
All the conflicting emotions disappeared in his vehemence. Kylo wasn’t certain and steadfast about many things, but he was about this. Before he could continue with his remarkably firm denial of her worthlessness, she said, “If you deserve nothing good in this galaxy, then neither do I.”

Rey wasn’t certain how the Supreme Leader of the galaxy ended up on his knees before her, but all at once he was grasping at her hands, and his eyes were pleading. “No, you’re good; you deserve everything. You’re better than any of us.”

“But I am your equal, you said so yourself,” she murmured.

“That’s not —”

Rey knelt to his level and cupped his cheeks in her hands. It didn’t escape her that he didn’t flinch. “You keep telling me that I’m good enough, that the darkness convinces me of lies, and you wish I could see myself the way you see me, but how am I supposed to believe that if you won’t believe it about yourself?”

Kylo had the good sense not to answer her with his deflections, but his eyes screamed the words he wouldn’t say. He desperately wanted to believe her. “So were you lying to me when you told me those things, or are you lying to yourself? Which one is it, Ben?”

As emotions pooled in his eyes, he answered softly, “I would never lie to you, Rey.”

Her hands fell away from his face. It wasn’t the truth, of course. Kylo would lie to her. He did. Though she almost ended his life for it, they both knew now that he hadn’t killed her family. That much she knew, but why he had chosen that moment to lie to her, that was another story. Regardless, that didn’t matter here. His words were telling. If he would never lie to her, then he was finally admitting—in his way—that he was lying to himself. If Kylo allowed the dead to stay dead, then there was nothing standing in the way of him coming home. He was so close, if she could just push him a little further…

“Rey?”

Turning at the new voice, she found Finn in the doorway. “Hey, I wanted to warn you…” He
paused, staring in Kylo’s direction. Rey scrambled to her feet and braced herself for another altercation. *Ben, please let me handle this,* she begged her bondmate over the bond, but he didn’t answer. When she turned, she found an emptiness where he had been kneeling, and her heart clenched at the loss of their progress. They had been so close….

“Who gave you that tea?” Rey was broken from her thoughts by the words, and she followed his line of sight. Was *that* what he had been staring at when he had come in? Had he even noticed Kylo?

“Poe gave it to me,” she answered, “as a peace offering.” She was hoping it would alleviate some of the fidgety agitation that was evident in every shift of his weight and flare of his nostrils. Something else passed over his face at the name, and she wished it was as easy to feel his emotions as it was her bondmate. What she did see in his eyes did nothing to put to rest her growing unease. It only intensified as he moved into the room, grabbed the cup off the table, and turned to leave.

“Finn, wait!”

He stopped at the entryway and tried his best to smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. They looked positively *murderous.* She had never seen this side of her friend, but she assumed this was what he had looked like on Starkiller when he was defending her from Kylo. “I like your hair,” he said.

Rey braced herself for the inevitable argument. “Are you asking who did it?”

“Would you tell me?”

Her eyes searched his, and she knew if she loved him, she would have to trust him. It would solve nothing if she lied to him or played him for a fool. “Ben did. He was here.”

His expression softened slightly. “I know; I saw him.” That answered at least *one* of her questions. The problem was, she sensed that wasn’t the reason for his agitation.

Despite that agitation, he stopped to scan her expression. "Are you okay?"

She nodded.
He glanced away down the corridor. “Can you control when… he shows up?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Good.”
Denial

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
“I never should have agreed to this!” Finn shouted as he stormed down the corridor, cup in hand, when he nearly collided with Rose. Her face brightened when she saw him, but he couldn’t manage to return her smile. He was screaming on the inside in panic.

“Hey, handsome, Chewie said he can take next watch if you want to go back to the bunks,” she said. “We could look through holomaps and find the perfect green world for a wedding, maybe sleep a little bit; you look exhausted.” Running her hand over his sweat-glistening forehead and twirling her fingers through the curls at his temple, her soothing touch quieted the multitude of thoughts crashing through his mind. His beautiful fiancée knew exactly how to calm him like no one else could.
His agitation melted away with the tension in his shoulders as he found comfort in her touch. “More than anything, right now,” he said, dropping his head to her shoulder. “I want to crawl in that bunk and forget the war. Everything is just so…”

“Complicated?” she offered, and he nodded into her shoulder. “The battles are simple. It’s everything else in war that’s complicated.” Rose always had a way of taking his perspective and tilting it on its axis. She had become more to him than a person to save from the cause he had once sworn loyalty. She – along with Rey and Poe – had become his family, and though everything in him still wanted to protect them, she had helped him become part of something greater than any of them. Rose had given him something to believe in; a reason worth fighting for, and if it came to it, worth dying for. “Just remember,” she whispered, “No matter who or what we’re fighting, as long as I still have breath, I’ll be right here beside you.”

For the first time in his life, he felt like he was in the right place. Part of him knew that the war could end the lives of one or all of them, likely at the hands of the very man his best friend loved. If these were his last days, then he would still consider himself the luckiest man in the galaxy to have experienced it at all. He had hope that there was something beyond this war, a life worth living that made it all worth it. Holding Rose in his arms reminded him that he still had to be present in now, that he couldn’t only rely on hope. It was difficult not to look to the horizon, to the ‘after,’ when all of their sacrifices would be worth it, but if he was going to ensure they all lived to see it, he couldn’t stand by any longer.

He would not take another moment with his family for granted, and that only strengthened his resolve. He had only found these people because he had refused to fight for a cause he knew was wrong. Though he agreed with everything they were fighting for now, he couldn’t reconcile his personal beliefs with what he knew Poe had planned. He loved Poe, like a brother, he would gladly give his own life to save the man. Standing by as he used Rey, however, was not something he could live with. Though he didn’t know what move Poe had made, he knew enough to believe it was strategic, and likely wasn’t good. “I think I have to stop him, Rose,” he whispered.

Rose backed away from him to force him to look at her. She stared up at him with fear in her eyes. “Who, Finn? What’s going on?”

Finn wanted nothing more than to tell her everything, but as colonel, he still wasn’t ready to completely betray his general. Not yet. He knew she’d understand. “Poe’s here,” he said. “After what he did on Kamino.” Rose was quiet, waiting patiently for him to continue. “Okay, let me back up. After everything that happened in the war room, Poe forced Rey to give him a vial that Kylo Ren had entrusted her with—”

“What happened in the war room?”

Finn took a slow breath, calming his nerves. “Remember the night before we left for Dantooine? When I went on that long walk until morning?” he asked softly. She nodded. “You know I saw Rey and Kylo together. You know what happened in that room. But what I didn’t tell you was that when I walked in, he was holding her and she was looking at him… well, like you look at me. When she chose him over me, I left her room and kept walking. I actually ended up in that other temple we found, talking to myself for hours. I had to know that if I was betraying my best friend, that it was out of necessity and not anger. It felt like there was no right choice. I waited until dawn. When I realized it wasn’t a secret I could keep, that you would be complicit to treason right alongside me, I went to Poe and told him that I saw her with our enemy.

“But he didn’t take her straight to a cell. He took her to the war room and forced her to call Kylo over their… whatever it is. It was like Kylo was in the room with us, Rose. He could have killed
us, but Poe kept pushing him, like he wanted a violent reaction from Kylo. Poe held a blaster to Rey’s head, and threatened to shoot her if he didn’t surrender. He told Kylo that Rey was a spy. Poe forced her to kiss him in front of Kylo. And Kylo was… how I would react if someone did that to you. I told Poe to stop, but he wouldn’t listen. We fought over my blaster, and it went off. It would have killed Poe, but Kylo froze the bolt like he did on Tuanul. He saved Poe’s life, but Poe turned around and shot Rey. It was set to stun, but –”

She shook her head. “Finn, that’s not…”

“It gets worse, Rose,” he whispered, steeling himself for her reaction to his role in this. “Poe locked her up, and said he was going to leave her on Barkhesh as an ambush for Kylo unless she proved her loyalty. So, she gave him a vial filled with a virus that Kylo entrusted her with. Poe told her he wouldn’t use it, but he destroyed the First Order’s clone army on Kamino with it. I don’t know what Kylo Ren will do when he finds out. Now Poe’s here because he wanted to debrief me on the next phase of his plan. He’s gathering the Resistance and appealing to other systems; he’s planning an attack. After Ilum. And I think…” he sighed, knowing that he was betraying his general, “he plans to use Rey as bait.”

His beautiful, smart fiancée understood the implications all too quickly. “To kill the man she loves.”

Finn bit his lip, forcing down his anger at her mention of Rey’s love for the monster. He managed a nod instead.

“Does she know?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know what to do,” he said, pleading with her to tell him what was right. “I can’t betray Poe, but I can’t be part of this.”

Rose searched his eyes for a moment. Finn feared she would ask him to tell her how he was involved, but she didn’t. “Where’s Rey?”

“She’s fine,” he huffed. “Well, she was with him so…”

The woman who sounded so calm about everything that had transpired between his best friend and the Supreme Leader, suddenly sounded panicked. “She’s with Ben? Right now? Does she know Poe’s here?”

“Ben?” He could do little to disguise his anger. “You too, Rose?”

“After everything I just asked, that’s what you’re focusing on?” She leveled him a withering look, and he swallowed the remainder of his argument. At the moment, none of it mattered, not even that he would have to kill the man his best friend loved. Rey could be in danger.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “But like I said before, I think… I have to stop him.”

“Ben, or Poe?”

He narrowed his eyes at her in frustration. “Right now? Poe.”

“How?”

It was a simple question, unfortunately, it didn’t have a simple answer. “I don’t know.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you,” she said carefully, “but have you thought about what happens if
you confront him?"

He shook his head, imagining the consequences if Poe deemed him a traitor. Had he known what he would do to Rey, he would have never told Poe about the connection between Rey and Kylo Ren. He had never seen his general as unhinged as he had become in the presence of the Supreme Leader. There was no doubt in his mind that, even if the First Order was defeated, Poe wouldn’t be happy until Kylo Ren was dead. What would he do to anyone who got in his way? “I don’t know what else to do.”

Rose wrapped her fingers around his hand, squeezing comfortingly. “I’ll stand by you, no matter what you choose.”

It meant more than he could express that she would choose him. Of course, he would choose her as well. When it came down to it, he would choose Rey too. He had lied for her when it mattered most, and now he had to protect her from the very cause that was supposed to save them all. “I think… after we help Rey on Ilum, we have to convince her not to return to the Resistance.”

“I agree. I know your heart, I trust your moral compass, but I need to ask; why now?” Her eyes were imploring him for the answer she must have known he was hiding from her. “What did he ask you to do, Finn?”

Finn wanted more than anything to tell her what Poe had ordered him to do. Part of him wanted to do it, to rid the galaxy of Kylo Ren, but part of him knew what he would do to Rey if he did. What would Rose do if he did it? He couldn’t bear telling her, not yet, if only because he feared what she would say. So he chose another truth instead. “I found this in her room.”

“Tea?”

“Yes!” he huffed, his mind reeling with the consequences. There was no reason for Poe to have harmed her, but there was no logical reason why he had ‘rendezvoused’ with them, and there was especially no reason why he would have gone out of his way to be kind to Rey. But more disconcerting than any of that, Finn remembered passing by the galley earlier, he remembered the look of fear on the general’s face when he asked if he could have some. ‘Not this one,’ Poe had told him, but he hadn’t understood the significance until he had seen it in Rey’s room.

Rose hesitated, trying her best to sound supportive. “You’re upset about… tea.”

“He gave her the tea!” he shouted, his large hands squeezing the cup to the breaking point. He eased back the pressure, knowing his fiancée would not be pleased if he broke another cup in his anger.

“Ben?” she asked, trying to follow why he was borderline hysterical.

“No, Poe…” he sighed, running his hand down his face. It sounded worse when he said it aloud, when he suspected him of things no friend would suspect of someone they care about.

“Why would Poe make her tea?”

He watched the grim realization fall across her face as she said the words. “Exactly.”

When he turned to confront their general, he left his fiancée behind in the corridor. She had sacrificed more than any of them for the cause; her sister had sacrificed everything. It would hurt her more than anything if she had to turn her back on the cause, but he knew she would, for Rey. He would too, but he still held hope it wouldn’t come to that. If Rey was far away from the Resistance, Poe couldn’t use her. Finn only hoped Poe hadn’t already done something he couldn’t
Poe leaned his body out of the galley entryway. “Finn, buddy, I thought you went back to the cockpit?”

Finn pushed past him into the galley, knocking him off-balance in the process, and slammed the cup onto the counter. “What did you do?”

Poe impassively looked from the cup, the tea sloshing over its sides, to his colonel. “It’s tea, Finn, not a bomb.”

“Drink it,” he demanded, grabbing the cup with its remaining contents and shoving it into Poe’s hands. In a flash, Poe’s demeanor had changed. The easy-going, friendliness disappeared – replaced by a look of betrayal. Poe raised the cup to his lips and finished the tea, his stare never breaking from his subordinate. There was an anger there that Finn had never seen directed toward him before.

“Be careful what you accuse me of, buddy,” he sneered, “I would never poison the girl who was key to our victory.”

“And we both know your peace offering was a lie,” Finn snapped back. “So why don’t you tell me how this is part of your plan?”

Poe leaned against the counter, shrugging his shoulders dismissively. “I wanted her to trust me.”

That did nothing to ease Finn’s fear. “What are you going to do?” he asked, voice low.

A smirk twisted Poe’s mouth, doing nothing to ease Finn’s fears. Neither did his following words, “I guess you’ll find out after Ilum.”
Lessons

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Blue beeped angrily at Kylo as he turned his back to him. Kylo was in a defensive posture, concentrating intently, his glowing red lightsaber poised to strike.

“Don't make me remove your chip,” Kylo said as he concentrated in the Force. His attention was split by the three floating, spherical droids that surrounded him. At random intervals, one of them would fire a beam in his direction. His careful blocks did little to quell the droid’s insistent beeps. “Death wish? Blue, the only droid in here who can kill me is you.”

The droid would not be deterred, continuing to follow him as he moved fluidly through forms. He barreled into Kylo's feet, nearly knocking him over. “Fine, kill me, but then you'll just have to find someone else to follow around all day. I'll ask Hux –” Kylo jerked away when he felt a sharp spark on the back of his calf. “Hey!” he turned to point a finger at the droid in a way he hoped would look chastising, but instead just reminded him too much of his father. “Someone should have programmed you with a sense of humor.” The droid beeped bitterly in retort. “Yes, I do!” Distracted by a combined assault between the droids in the air and the droid at his feet, one of the floating droids was able to circle behind him.

"Ben! Watch out!" He turned in surprise. He had been so distracted that he hadn’t sensed Rey. His eyelids popped open to take in her concerned features. Sensing hesitation, the floating droids fired. He attempted to block all the beams, but one slipped through and hit him in the abdomen.

"No!" Rey gasped, as Blue whirred around in panic. He waved his hand, and the floating droids deactivated. Turning to her, he calmly pushed his hair out of his face.

“Training droids,” he chuckled, shaking his head.

“Why were your eyes closed! Do you have a death wish?” Blue whistled in affirmation, and Kylo groaned dramatically.

“You two deserve each other.”

He was wearing a thin undershirt and his arm guards; it was obvious he was uninjured. Rey pushed him, clearly not as amused as he was. "You scared Blue!" He squinted one eye as sweat dripped from his brow, a shadow of a grin playing on the corners of his mouth.
“Just Blue?” The droid beeped at his feet, thoroughly chastening him. There was no anger or fear on Rey’s face, however. It was that look again, the one he had seen during the last few connections. It was as if she were happy to see him. Though he didn’t know why, he knew something had changed between them. It was disarming, but not at all unpleasant.

_This is just a manifestation of your own desires, Ren,_ the voices in his head warned him.

He would have believed them—because why would _she_ ever want him—had she not reached out and embraced him, sweaty mess and all. At first, he wasn’t certain what her intentions were as she moved toward him. Tensing as he grasped her arm, he assumed she had tripped into him until he felt her arms firmly clutch onto him. It wasn’t the first time she had done it, but that didn’t make it any less surprising. He tentatively wrapped his arms around her, confused as ever, but he couldn't deny her anything.

"Why were you closing your eyes before?" she asked. She ran her hand through his hair, rolling the damp strands between her fingers, and it took everything in him not to close his eyes. If this was a dream, he wanted to enjoy it a little longer.

“To sense them in the Force,” he said distantly, focusing on the warmth of her in his arms. It was terrifying, because he could see himself becoming accustomed to her touch. He _coveted_ it. And he struggled to remind himself that this was only temporary, that _all_ good things were only temporary. She stared up at him, expecting him to say more, and it took him a moment to remember what they were talking about. Clearing his throat, he added, “It’s the first thing a Jedi learns, and probably the most important.”

The Force had always been a contentious subject between them, but this time was different. She was interested, she was listening, she was _participating._ “I learned to reach out, to _feel_, but I could never _see_, not without Luke’s guidance. I have these Jedi skills, but I stole them all from our bond.”

“Well, you’re working backward, more or less,” he said, choosing his words carefully so it did not become a conversation of light versus dark. “You know how to do these things; because you’re powerful with the Force and a capable fighter, and you learned what little else you needed through me. But you’re missing the foundation. Once you have it, you won’t need our bond; you could do anything. That’s why…."

"…you offered to teach me on Starkiller," she finished.
Kylo stepped out of her embrace. His eyes narrowed as he studied her. “Yes… you almost killed me because of that.”

"Key word – almost," she said, waving away his words. “So, is that offer still good? Now, for instance?" Though she was asking for his help, it meant far more to Kylo than it did to her. It was… everything he had wanted since he had felt her incredible power. She had never trusted him to teach her. She had sought help in his uncle, his mother, and the Jedi texts. She had used the bond for the rest. Now she was asking him. Something had changed between them, indeed.

"No, I can’t teach you,” he answered, and he watched the disappointment pass over her face. Before she could respond, he added, “but I can help you teach yourself.” A mixture of warm emotions swelled in the bond, and she nodded enthusiastically. “Then close your eyes." He shifted to stand next to her, but his head was turned to focus on her face. Rey bit her lip in anticipation and followed his instructions. Kylo did his best to find the calm he required for the task. "You’re not going to feel me in the Force for a moment,” he warned. “Don’t worry, I’m just blocking your access to my training in the bond. Everything you do will be completely on your own, but I’ll be right here with you. In the deeper levels of the Force, it will be difficult to concentrate on my voice. I need you to keep your side of the bond open so you can still hear me in your mind, okay?”

Okay, she answered.

Ready?

Rey nodded. Kylo took far longer than necessary to close his eyes as he watched her smile light up her entire face. Though he had done it a million times before, he couldn’t contain his own exhilaration. She had chosen him to be the one who showed her deeper levels of the Force. This feeling…it wasn’t quite possessive, but it awakened something in him he’d never felt before.

Slow your breathing...

Kylo focused on his respiration and felt her align her breaths with his. Her side of the bond was open completely; he could feel everything she felt. It was initially difficult to concentrate because of the warmth of the emotions that surrounded him. Emotions were necessary in the upper levels of the Force, but not where they needed to go. If she was anything like him, she needed to see it, then she could learn to trust in it. Let your feelings go… let it all flow out into the Force… become the Force around you...

Breathe...
It wasn’t easy to learn; allowing your emotions out and the Force in, but she was a natural. He could have been a Jedi Master, he thought distantly, if every student learned as easily as she did. *Focus that Force inside you... don’t let it guide you through the world around you... focus on what you want to see...*

*I can sense you there... but I can’t see you,* she said impatiently.

Kylo had never been known for his patience, but around her, he became many things he had never been before. *It's there in front of you... it’s like taking off a blindfold...you just have to trust in it... know that it's there...*

He could have asked her to stop. It was more than anyone else could learn on their first day, but he knew she could learn more. It was a crash course, but he didn’t have weeks to teach her. He doubted if he had days. *Okay,* she said, and he felt her mind expand into the Force again.

*You’ve seen it before, when you found our bond with Luke... go deeper into the Force... see the energy around you...*

*Breathe...*

Kylo dropped into a deeper level of the Force and waited for her. He could sense her searching, he could feel her frustration, but she didn’t give up. Her stubbornness and determination were not a hindrance to her as they were to him. She allowed the Force to guide her across its currents for a moment until she gained an instinctive awareness and pushed into the deeper levels of the Force.

*I can see it!* He could feel the warmth of her smile around them. *“But it's different. It's different from the visions I saw with Luke, or when I followed the bright string of our bond to you. I can see everything. I can see the air around me. I knew everything was made up of this... energy, I felt it, I was shown it, but now I can see it. Everything around us is energy...”*

*I did it.*

You did, he agreed, *Without the bond, or Luke, or the powerful Force on Ahch-To. You did this... now reach your hand out.* She immediately followed his instructions, trusting him. She had overcome the most difficult obstacle; finding the deeper levels of the Force. Once she understood
this next lesson, she wouldn’t need him or the bond. He watched her move her hand, the energy in
the air bouncing and altering its course around her. She wiggled her fingers and watched the
particles vibrate.

*I can see it. I can feel it; not just the guidance of the Force. I can feel the energy!*

Shhhh, he chuckled. *You’ll lose the connection. A Jedi less powerful would have lost it already.*
It was the truth. Kylo had always been so overly critical, so overly focused on achieving *more*,
that he never experienced that, but he remembered well the excitement his fellow Jedi students
exhibited when making progress in the deeper levels of the Force. It was a common occurrence
during training. It wasn’t, however, common for the others to maintain concentration during that
excitement. She was untrained, but, even when they first met, he knew her capabilities were
endless. He was in awe of her, and soon the rest of the galaxy would see it, too.

*Breathe...*

*What you see is the connection with the energy around you. You’ve felt it; you already know what
to do, but now you can see how it works. Move the force with your hand.* It took her a moment, far
quicker than the weeks or months padawans spent learning the concept, before he felt her energy
swell in the Force. Slowly, but with more confidence and capability each time, she pushed and
pulled the particles between her hands.

*All matter is energy, it can all be manipulated. I've seen you summon a lightsaber, and I've sensed
you repel boulders on Crait. You have been able to do these things through pure will and a little
help from our bond. But when you can feel it, trust in it, see it... then you won't need the bond. Your
power will be greater than you can imagine.*

Rey moved her hand back and forth as the particles followed the currents of her exertion. As she
practiced, her movements became more confident and powerful. *Teach me more…* Her
excitement brightened the energy around them before she could refocus. He felt weightless, yet
purposeful, as if his actions truly mattered. If there was one good thing he did in his life, helping
this powerful woman reach her full potential was worth it. He had opened her eyes to what she
could be and that made *him* feel powerful.

*Repel that training droid...* he said, bringing himself back to the moment before he lost the
connection. *You already know how to reach out with your emotions, you know the feel of the
Force flowing through you, now use it. Don't will it, don't fight the Force, don't rely on the skills
you've learned... just feel it pushing away from you... trust in it the way you trust your hands to
move the energy between your fingers... focus your energy into reaching out... find the energy of
the droid... and push it away from you.*
Pushing or pulling – it was a matter of preference when determining which one to begin with, but he believed it was far easier to control the energy in a simple push. Rey tried, and it worked to an extent. The droid moved haphazardly away from her because she willed it – releasing a strong pulse of energy that displaced the energy around it. It didn’t control the direction or object itself, only pushed particles into other particles until the object moved. What he needed her to do was manipulate the energy of the object itself. Her method wasn’t necessarily wrong, but it was taxing and unnecessary.

Finding her in the Force, he pressed his palm on her upper arm. Demonstrating what he wanted, he allowed his energy to flow into her arm until it reached her fingertips. He released a concentrated beam of energy into the Force. It spread from her hand, energizing the particles it touched along its way. Like a pebble in a pond, the energy under his control increased exponentially until it contained the energy of the droid. The particles didn’t just move, they formed a connection, like a living being. It had become an extension of himself, connecting to the energy as if it was his hand encompassing the droid. Rey gasped as she watched the change in the Force. The beam manipulated the droid’s energy, pushing the droid away from her. I feel your energy inside me, her voice whispered along the currents of energy between them. I see it flowing out my hand into the Force. It’s different than my energy, but somehow, the same. Does that make sense?

Breathe, Kylo said, trying his best not to think about it. Now you do it.

The energy around them spiked until it flowed out and around the droid, forcing it away unsteadily.

It’s strange, she said, watching the energy leave my body.

When you manipulate the Force rather than, well, force it, only an inconsequential amount is flowing out. If you ever try to heal someone, it leaves considerably faster, at a rate you can’t easily replenish from the Force around you. It is an equal exchange, lifeforce for lifeforce, which this is not. Rey was quiet, and he wondered if the same stolen memory was replaying in her mind. Instead of forcefully trying to shut Dev’s face from his mind, Kylo let the visage linger, if only to share a moment with Dev when he wouldn’t have disappointed him. It wasn’t often Kylo did something that wouldn’t have disappointed him. This isn’t an equal exchange, but you do exchange energy with the Force. The more energy you manipulate, the more energy you release into the Force.

So... could I do this... with anything?
Most of your limitations are all in your mind, but there are limitations. It was the limitations of the Force that were the most dangerous. He knew them better than anyone. But, you’d kill yourself before dragging a Star Destroyer from the sky.

What about a TIE fighter?

Let’s try the droid first. Summoning an object is the same concept, but with an extra step.

She seemed surprised that he released the same beam of energy in the same manner he had before. Once the beam connected with the energy of the droid, the living energy responded to his slight pull and drew it toward him like gravity. He knew it made more sense to exert will over the droid, to displace the energy around her by drawing it into her hand, but he hoped she would trust him. He flicked the droid away and held it in stasis.

Your turn.

It didn’t feel natural to release energy in order to summon an object, he would have explained as much, but she didn’t even question him. He felt her own beam of concentrated energy stretch toward the droid and connect to its energy. On her next inhale, she manipulated the energy with more strength than she required. The droid rocketed toward her and smacked against her fingers.

Oi!

You don’t need to use so much energy when you’re not trying to overpower it.

I can feel you laughing, she said, her own energy bright, it’s distracting.

Bring it back, he said, turning his attention back to the lesson before he lost his focus completely. Push it away... lift it up, push it down … manipulate it wherever you want it to go. She focused on the droid's energy and moved it as she had with the smaller particles. She used both hands to spin and bounce it, her abilities refining with each manipulation. What took her seconds to refine took most people years. It was fascinating… and oddly thrilling.

Now suspend it. Without any of his assistance, she held it in stasis, making gentle corrections to keep it steady.
Suspend it again. This time, he lifted his opposite hand and dragged the droid toward her. She tried to stop it, but she strained against the opposing energy.

**I can’t. The other energy is too strong.** Kylo could feel her discouragement over the bond. He knew her connection was wavering.

Don’t fight it... trust it... know that you can stop it... just like you knew you could stop me on Starkiller. He felt her confidence return. She responded with a surge of energy, overpowering his steady flow that drew it toward them. The droid shot away from them before he caught it.

Again.

Focus... He exerted more energy to draw the droid toward her again. Feel the energy of the droid... connect with its energy... match it...

Another swell of energy built it the Force. The droid’s steady velocity slowed, then stopped.

Good.

They could spend the rest of the connection practicing that, but they didn’t have that kind of time. Twitching his fingers, he activated one of the droids.

There was a hint of uneasiness to her voice. Ben...

Trust in it... feel its energy... just like before...

The droid’s gone! Her breathing quickened as she stepped away from him, turning in a circle. I can feel it moving, but I lost it. I can’t see it in the Force.

Breathe... you’re trying too hard... trust in the Force... trust that it’s there, and it will be there.
He waited. There was no doubt in his mind she would pick it up momentarily, far quicker than anyone else could.  *Ben, I can’t. The energy – it’s vibrating around me. The droid is moving too fast! I can’t* –

She cried out when a beam shot from the droid and hit her in the chest.  *Ow!*

Kylo was silent. This was something she needed to feel on her own. Sensing her pulse quicken in the Force, he knew she was panicking. *Wait for the change. You’ll feel it.* He could sense energy in the droid intensifying. A ripple in the Force provided a clear warning. The energy in the droid spiked immediately preceding a beam that shot out again. She tensed for the shock, so he intervened. The beam and the droid were stalled in place. He moved his hand slightly, and the beam spun around.

*Feel it.* It would have been easier to manipulate the energy through her again, but he stopped himself. She had never needed him; she just didn’t realize it yet. He would help her see the truth. All she needed was to trust in herself, to see that all she needed was herself. That was all she had needed all along.

Rey’s powers were… spectacular to witness. She reached out and touched the energy. It was intense – the concentrated stream of particles bouncing off each other – but she was calm and confident. Releasing her own energy into the Force, she connected to the energy of the beam. He slowly released it to her until she held the entirety of the energy in her palm.  *Good, now turn in and release it.*

*I can’t, if I let go…*

*Trust, Rey. Let go.* She used both of her hands and strained to turn it. *Don’t fight it.* He felt her let go of her fears. Slowly, she stopped fighting against it and allowed the energy to push against her ever so slightly. Using the strength of its own energy to manipulate it, she moved it with ease. When it was pulling away from her rather than moving toward her, she released it into the training room wall in front of her. It was breathtaking how quickly she learned, as if it was as simple as breathing.

Kylo immediately reactivated the droid, and a beam came flying at her. It was too late to stop it, but she redirected it away from her. He chose not to intervene as the next beam built inside the droid. There was a calm that settled over her that reminded him of the change that washed over her on the edge of that cliff on Starkiller. He bit back a smile as he waited. When the beam shot out, she froze it a half meter from her face.
I did it! He could feel her exhilaration surround him in the Force. In response, he activated the other two droids.

Ben… The exhilaration faded to trepidation. But he didn’t step in, he knew she could handle it. She just needed to prove it to herself. Rey froze one beam. A beam from the other droid shocked her. That broke her concentration, so the beam she had frozen hit her chest. Ow! Ben!

Come on, Rey. You can do this.

It was absurd – what he was asking of her. What she had already learned was easily years worth of training in minutes. No one else could have done what he was asking. But she could. Her energy in the Force dimmed as she tried to maintain a connection with the distraction of the droids. Two more shocks to the side, and she was starting to panic. He could hear her repeat to herself, freeze the droids, freeze the droids, freeze the droids! The energy was rising again in all three of the droids, it would be difficult for her to put all three in stasis, but he did not intervene. As the droids released the beams, there was an explosion of energy out through her hands that blinded him in the Force.

He braced for… something.

Nothing happened.

Then he opened his eyes.

“Rey…” Kylo whispered in awe, “open your eyes.” She did without question, blinking as the world of the Force disappeared. Confusion, followed by shock, then awe, flickered across her face. Kylo presumed his own expression mirrored hers as they stared at the wall of energy around her. The Force wall was transparent, the concentrated energy vibrating and buzzing in front of her. The droids were still firing upon her, but the beams were ineffective against the energy shield she had created.

Kylo touched the energy with his fingers, but it pushed back against him like a solid surface. By the expression on her face, it was clear that it had not been intentional. It was likely a result of panic and instinct, but that wasn’t what was important. Now she knew she had the potential to do this. She could no longer question her abilities. She didn’t need him—or their bond—she could do anything.
Her energy flickered, and he realized how taxing that amount of energy would be to hold in stasis for any given length of time. As the shield of Force absorbed the beams directed at it, he could feel the vibrations shudder through her. Her body began to shake with fatigue. “Let go, Rey,” he warned, but she maintained her grip on the energy. Her side of the bond faded with her connection to consciousness.

Kylo stepped forward, catching her as she fell. Shifting to his knees, he intended to lay her on the floor before she reawakened, as he was certain his face was not the first thing she would want to see when she opened her eyes. Unfortunately, she regained consciousness quicker than he had anticipated. “Ben?” He could find no excuse for why he held her cradled in his arms. Uneasy, an apology formed on his lips as he met her questioning stare. When he looked at her, however, he didn’t see the fear or anger he expected to see—the emotions he had been accustomed to finding when she had awoken to find him in her presence.

Rey slid out of his arms, and he moved to stand up to give her space from him—to give *himself* time to formulate a coherent response for why he had touched her. But she grabbed his hand. She was… smiling.

All he could think to say to break the silence was, “Are you okay?”

“All I okay?” she laughed. “That was…amazing!” Her smile was contagious, and he found himself smiling despite his best efforts. Her arms were around him again for the second time in less than an hour, and he wondered if *he* was the one who had lost consciousness. It had to be a dream. She had embraced him before, of course, but he could explain it away as sorrow or gratitude. The more she did it, however, the more difficult it became to explain. People didn’t just touch him because they wanted to. But he remembered his hope in the hut. Could *she*?

"Yes, it was," he said with his best attempt at an even tone when she was so *warm* against him. Her braided hair – the hair *he* had braided—smelled like damp earth and metal and sweat. Nothing about those smells should have meant anything to him, but it smelled like *her*, and it had become a salve. It temporarily fixed the broken pieces inside him, every time he breathed her in. He felt it again—that he was exactly where he was supposed to be. It created a yearning inside him. He desperately wanted to hold her, if only to selfishly keep her there for a moment longer, but the way he reacted to her embrace would disgust her. He wanted more than anything to touch her and that was exactly why he didn’t. This wasn’t about him. So closed his eyes, reveling in the moment, and too soon she had slipped from his arms to the floor. It helped his situation little when she stared up at him like he was something different than what everyone else saw. It was the same look she had given him in the refresher after her lightsaber had exploded in her hand. At least he wasn’t wearing a towel this time.

Kylo cleared his throat. “How is the lightsaber reconstruction?” It was an attempt to steer them onto a safer path, they both knew, but she allowed him the small escape from confronting emotions
Rey stood and nearly bounced to a nearby table. He remained on his knees as he watched her find the object of her focus. When she turned around, there was a soft smile on her lips but an uncertainty in her eyes. She found her way back to him and offered him the welded hilt. “Rose thinks it will explode,” she said. “I was too nervous to try it.”

Kylo considered the weapon for a moment. Her friend was likely right, but they didn’t have a Jedi Master to help guide them. Trial and error was their only option. He lowered his barriers to the bond. To do this, they would need the shared strength of the bond. “Can you create that Force barrier again?”

She stared at him for a moment, before she decided he was serious. As she closed her eyes, he sensed her access deeper levels of the Force. There was a moment of pushing and pulling in the energy around him before a small barrier appeared over her hand. She adjusted the intensity of energy she released, and it grew until she was standing behind a wall of energy. He moved behind the energy wall as well and manipulated the lightsaber hilt to hover on the other side of the barrier.

Their eyes met and he nodded. “Do it.” Lifting his other hand as a precaution, he slowed his breathing as he found a deeper connection to the energy around him. “I’m ready.” Rey closed her eyes again to find the ignition switch in the Force. With a sharp breath, she triggered the switch.

There was an ominous ripple that swelled through the Force, displacing the energy around him. It was slight; the smallest wrinkle in the living energy that created the world around them. But it was enough. His own energy was flooding from his fingertips as the Force around them erupted in a bright, blinding light. A powerful shock wave crashed into the barrier, knocking them both back in the impact. Kylo found the expanding energy of the explosion and contained it as best he could before it destroyed the room around them.

When the energy had settled, Rey’s Force barrier was still holding strong. “Contain the energy,” he told her. With one hand still holding the Force barrier, the other found the explosive energy he had grasped in the Force. As she took the immense power into her own hands, he slowly released his hold. The explosion had been small in relation to its size, but the power it contained was incredible. Rey released the explosive energy slowly, smothering the byproduct of heat. The damage to the lightsaber was minimal, but the lightsaber was in two again. It fell onto the floor in broken pieces, and she released the barrier. “Well… at least the barrier held,” she sighed.

Fishing the crystals from inside the twisted mechanism, she rolled them in her palm. The crystals themselves hadn’t broken further, but it was clear that the damage had been done. The fractures within them that had been created in the throne room were irreparable. The legacy of those crystals
died with Rey and Kylo, and if that wasn’t an omen for his destiny, Kylo didn’t know what was. He only hoped she would be spared from it by association. “I think the Force is trying to tell me it’s time for a new crystal,” Rey joked as she studied him carefully. His grim thoughts must have been plain to read on his face, but he wouldn’t waste breath on words they both knew to be true; it was time for the Skywalker legacy to end. They had brought nothing but pain and suffering to the galaxy.

Kylo picked up the broken lightsaber, checking the damage to the hilt. He removed the bottom of the casing and checked the contents inside, sighing with relief before twisting it back in place. Turning to her, he watched her own expression fall as she examined the crystals. She was discouraged, but she had no reason to be. What she had done was nothing less than incredible. She deserved to be focusing on her accomplishments. Kylo was terrible at cheering anyone up—he always had been—but he knew his bondmate well enough to hope maybe he could make an exception with her. “Now that you can manipulate energy, try it on me.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What?”

Her reaction wasn’t what he had expected, but he was convinced she would come around to the idea. It was the opportunity to use the Force against him without retaliation. “Push me.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she said, and a memory of her blade slashing across his face flashed through the partially open bond. She was powerful, but she underestimated his ability to absorb that energy, especially when he knew it was coming.

“You won’t hurt me, I promise.” There was something that sparked in her eyes with his last words, shocking her speechless. He wondered if it was what he had said, or how he had said it, that drew her attention. Was it the promise? Were promises as significant to her, as they were to him?

Kylo never received his answer, because, after a moment, she had recovered. With a shake of her head, she immediately returned to her stubborn and unyielding stance. He was thinking of another retort, but he hesitated when a smirk fluttered across her pink lips. It was distracting enough that he hadn’t recognized the energy passing over him until he was thoroughly paralyzed in place. She would make an excellent holochess or cards player; he’d give her that. It should have terrified him, but he found that he trusted her. She circled him playfully, and he smiled. “Your talents truly are wasted used as bait for the Resistance.”

Enjoying her game, he could have chosen not to fight back, but he had never understood the purpose of tempering one’s skills according to an opponent’s skill level. In Jedi training, he gave everything he had, every time. A strong opponent made a stronger Jedi. Even on Starkiller, he may not have wanted to kill her, but he didn’t go easy on her. The trick to breaking through a Force hold was to fight back, forcing an opponent to expend energy, but also to expend less energy fighting
back than the opponent maintaining the hold. Rey was strong, but a Force hold against another Force user was a temporary endeavor. As her hold over him weakened, he assumed she would release him, but she held on for as long as she could. As he waited patiently for her to tire, he asked, “Anything else you want to practice?”

She lifted her hand and waved it gently. Kylo felt her strong will in his mind to influence his thoughts. It was impressive that she could maintain a powerful hold over his energy while she worked a persuasive manipulation into his mind. “You will leave the First Order.”

“I will leave the First Order,” he said flatly. The energy that held him fell away. The shock was clear on her face, but it was even stronger over the bond. Though the energy around him no longer held him in stasis, he stood still as she searched his eyes. She didn’t seem to like what she found there. “Where should I go?” he finally said, leaning his shoulder against the training room wall, “What should I do once I leave? You should probably be more specific. I would have at least insisted on surrendering to the Resistance.”

“That’s not funny, Ben.” He didn’t insult her by smiling, though if the mirthful spark in her eyes was anything to go by, she wasn’t entirely serious. She stepped closer, and it only served to deteriorate any of the remaining control he was foolish to believe he had. He pushed himself off the wall to face her.

It was a situation he often found himself in around her, this unsteady feeling—like he could never quite gain his footing. It should have been disconcerting, the way she upset the world around him like the loss gravity. It would have, if she wasn’t the only light illuminating his path, guiding him to surer ground. “For the record, I wouldn’t want you to surrender to the Resistance,” she whispered.

It was a lie. It had to be a lie, because if she didn’t want him for that, what was his use to her? Even if he left the First Order, Hux would step up to take his place, and he would have no reservations about finding her friends. Though she was raised ignorant of the politics of the galaxy, and he was nearly certain the Resistance wasn’t injudicious enough to allow her in highly classified meetings, she was no fool. She had to know the consequences of leaving the First Order. Why would she put the Resistance in danger, if she wasn’t intent upon him surrendering himself and his wealth of information to them?

There was something… something else in her eyes, something he had seen before and could never parse out, something he had seen more in her lately. It was at once terrifying and thrilling and discouraging; though whatever it was, it was no use contemplating. In the end, it didn’t matter, because he knew how it ended. Before he allowed his foolish mind to become lost in meaningless things like hope and desire, he had to remind himself that their fates were as connected as their minds. Looking at her as she stared up at him with those bright, fierce gold-flecked hazel eyes, it was difficult to imagine their newfound friendship ending with her turning against him, yet he
knew his life would end by her hands.

Kylo only realized he was still staring at her when she said, “You’re doing it again—that intense staring thing that you do.” It wasn’t the first time he’d heard that about himself, though he never quite understood it. For the most part, he had never intended to stare “intensely.” He didn’t know what was intense about it, nor did he do anything differently than he ever did. There were occasions he would glare in irritation or attempt to intimidate, but that was not the case with her. “And now you’re doing the lip thing.”

He sighed. There was part of him that was irritated that she had suddenly become an expert in his quirks, but there was another part—a more uncomfortable, flighty part—that was pleased she noticed. There was a thought then—a terrifyingly consequential thought—and she must have read the significance on his face. “Tell me what’s going on in that chaotic mind of yours, Ben.”

With a mental flourish, he raised the barriers in his mind. It felt strange to close her out of his side of the bond, something he hadn’t done since he had nearly killed her on Mustafar. There was still something far too vulnerable about allowing her to be privy to a substantial piece of him—emotions and thoughts he had tried desperately to hide from everyone save for her—but if he was lost to darkness again, at least she’d have warning and a chance to kill him first. “I could tell you, or you could take it.”

He could feel a nervous flutter across the bond. “You’re not talking about over the bond… are you?”

“Think of it as hide-n-seek in here,” he said with a tap to his temple.

She shifted on her feet uncomfortably, staring at her boots. “Ben, I… I don’t know what that is.” Kylo ground his teeth to restrain his self-loathing. Of course, she didn’t know the game. She had grown up alone in a harsh, desert world. How could he have been so foolish?

“It’s easy,” he explained, hoping she didn’t detect the emotion in his voice. “It’s a game where one person hides and the other… seeks. Like this war: it’s a life and death version of hide-n-seek. It’ll be the same concept here, only I’ll hide, and you’ll seek.” He searched her face for a glimmer of disapproval, but he found none. “You’ll find a way into my mind and find that thought. You can do it, you did it when we first met, only this time you’ll find your own way in. You’ll do it the same way you moved those droids. I have a thought in my head right now. I’ll protect it in a place that I was able to hide from Snoke… Sidious—and you’ll find it.”

“If Sidious couldn’t find it, how will I?” Though she sounded averse to the idea, she didn’t look
it. Biting her lip, she looked… hopeful.

“Because you know me better than he ever did.” He was likely staring "intensely" again, because she was giving him an odd look. But he wanted her to see the truth in his eyes.

“But I’ve never done this before.”

“You never held a lightsaber before, either, but that didn’t stop you,” he replied. Kylo knew the smile spreading across her face was answer enough, but he wanted her to know just how capable she was. “You have no idea how powerful you are, do you, Rey? You still have no idea of your full potential. You just created your own force barrier, you mastered things it takes years to learn. You’ve taken knowledge of skills from the bond, yes, but it’s only knowledge. You still did it all with an ease I’ve never seen before. You can do anything.”

Rey wouldn’t back down from a challenge; he knew she would do it, even as she continued to argue. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’ll feel it if you do.” Evidently, it was enough, because Rey closed her eyes. Taking her cue, he fortified his mental barriers and closed his eyes as well. It took her a moment to find his mind without the aid of the bond, but she found him. The first spindles of her energy that crept across his mind were hesitant, tentative.

I’m not going to break, Rey.

When she met the sturdy barriers he had used to block her from his thoughts, she became more confident. Though she didn’t have the bond, she had always excelled at crumbling his defenses. He left the thought at the tip of his mind, so she could get just the taste of it before he hid it securely away.

Kylo resisted her attempts; there was no point in going easy on her, but it wasn’t as painful as resisting Sidious. Where Sidious had used strength to overpower him, Rey was more patient. She found a weak point; a crack between breaths, a split-second distraction, and before he could reinforce the weakness she had slipped inside. The touch of her energy upon the thought was all he allowed before he withdrew deeper into his own mind. Finding the spot that had been proven safe from Sidious, he hid the thought there and waited.

Kylo had practice hiding his thoughts, and he used his tried and true thoughts and distractions to
deceive her. Rey sorted through thoughts of First Order propaganda, training techniques, and mundane contemplations such as what would happen if the entire Star Destroyer was sucked into a black hole. She easily pushed past his surface thoughts and went straight for his memories as if he had left a glowing trail for her to follow.

Where Sidious tore apart everything in his search—like ripping every item out of a drawer to find the hidden possessions underneath—Rey was more methodical. She ignored memories of suffering and triumph, war and meditation, and kindness and malice. What he left for her was different than the decoy memories he left to catch Sidious’s interest; he left memories of her, snippets of happy moments with his father, his frustrations with the First Order, and fleeting thoughts of what he dreamed for his future before the First Order. He knew she would find interest in all of what he had left as a distraction. Her yearning to stop and dissect them all was clear in the conflicted emotions he felt from her. It was everything she wanted to know about him, all she had to do was look.

Sidious had always fallen for it. He would leave little thoughts about his doubt in himself, his fear that his training would not allow him to reach his fullest potential, or his renewed anger at his family. They were thoughts his master had great interest in, and the creature wouldn’t discover the thoughts he had hidden away. Rey paused over his memory of when she had told him she "loved" him, and he thought he had tempted her. With a reluctant hesitation, however, she pushed onward.

Passing over a section of memories of his family, she seemed like she was heading deeper into more private memories, but she stopped. Her search was no longer indiscriminate. There was a certainty that grew as she sifted through the sections of memory, and his pulse quickened in response. Rey hesitated over a particular section of memories. They were memories of his beliefs and thoughts regarding his grandfather. Specifically, his belief that he was as strong and powerful as the man known as Darth Vader.

She pushed through the memories, which were all quite similar, until she reached memories when he wondered if he shared the same weakness as well. In that fear of sentiment, she found buried under countless memories of his confidence in his power, the memories he held most sacred. There was the little girl who had given him hope, memories of Dev and Jacen from the Jedi temple, the hesitation he felt on the skyway and outside the Raddus, and his memories of their connections on Ahch-To. Every memory that Sidious would have torn apart to deter his… sentiment was hidden there. When she paused over the memory of the hut, he shifted it away. Reviewing that memory was more terrifying than her discovering the thought he was hiding from her—which was an inevitability at that point.

By the time she successfully found the thought, his stomach was in knots. He had been a fool to suggest this. Why hadn’t he used a mundane thought to teach her the exercise? Kylo waited as she brought the memory of the thought to the surface. Experienced it. Experienced it again. It was altogether too long before she pulled away from his thoughts, a little too sharply so they both winced. Though he would have taken the pain over the way she was looking at him.
He waited.

“Is that true?” she finally whispered.

Kylo didn’t trust his voice, so he bit back the truth on his tongue and nodded. He wasn’t certain she saw it before the Force dragged her back to her side of the galaxy.
Chapter End Notes

Brief description of an injury
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
It was one simple sentence, but if it was true, if it was as significant to her as it was to him, then it changed everything.

It was complicated enough that the Force had shut their connection when Rey had so many questions about his consequential words. It was worse, because they hadn’t been connected again since. Had he meant it? Or had she twisted his little game of "hide-n-seek" into something that it wasn’t? Perhaps he had used that thought because he knew its significance to her, even if it wasn’t true. She couldn’t ask him, because he had disappeared and never returned. Had he sensed her hope that the words were true? Had he regretted it? Certainly, it wasn’t real. That was impossible, wasn’t
That was what she convinced herself in the silence following their connection. If he had meant it, he wouldn’t have blocked her out. And he had clearly blocked her out. At first, she was angry with him. How could he play games with her heart, then leave her alone without another word? That wasn’t the man she thought she knew. The longer they went without contact, however, the more unsettled she became. What if… what if something terrible had happened. Kylo had told her that a mutiny was "only a matter of time." What if he was in danger? What if he was imprisoned?

As the others slept, she slipped away to the Engineering Bay, where her friends couldn’t find her or hear her. It was in all their best interests if she avoided another confrontation, though she was thankful it was made easier by Poe’s departure. If Rose or Finn found them, she trusted that Kylo would be safe. She trusted him to keep them safe.

Rey slid down the wall and closed her eyes. She dragged herself deeper into the Force as she had done once with Luke’s guidance the only time he appeared to her after his death. It would be simpler this time; she had the assistance of the bond, a hyperlane straight into his mind. Rey followed the glowing cord across the stars until she found the dark, viscous stormcloud of his consciousness.

Her face was reflected in the darkness as she approached. She had hesitated before, only allowing herself to touch it, but this time she was resolute in her determination. Her outstretched palm touched the substance, and she was surprised by its solidity. A mist of darkness passed over her hand, but it felt less like a cloud and more like a wall. No, not a wall, she thought, staring at her reflection through the mist, a mirror. Gathering her light around her, she used the strength of the Force to push through the thickness of the slimy darkness and into his mind. As soon as the light touched the shadows, it was effortless. There was not a single barrier to stop her. The darkness subsided, and she was in Ben Solo’s mind.

Immediately, she was met with temptation. She had access to his thoughts, memories, feelings, secrets. She had access to everything. Anything she had ever wanted to know about him was at her fingertips; all she had to do was search for it.

If she wanted to know sensitive information about the First Order – where they were located, their battle strategies and weaknesses – she could find it without resistance. If she wanted to know his most vulnerable memories or even his deepest, darkest secrets… it was all at her mercy. She could dissect his true feelings for her, a question that had plagued her thoughts for weeks. And, perhaps, if he were truly her enemy—if she didn’t love him—she might have explored the places he would never grant her access.

The wings of her desire for knowledge of him were weighed down by the burden of an unspoken
promise to him. If she took from him what he had not willingly given, it would be a betrayal of his trust. Despite her profound curiosity, her loyalty to him and their bond was stronger. It might have been everything the Resistance needed to win the war, but they were enemies no longer.

Rey focused instead on the memories and feelings that were immediately present when she entered his consciousness, hoping there would be an answer to why he had shut her out from the bond. Well, it was more like she stumbled upon them. She was immediately met with his thoughts when she entered his consciousness, just as she had been the first time in the interrogation room. Only this time, his thoughts were not centered on finding the map and becoming as powerful as Darth Vader.

Not to say there weren’t thoughts of Darth Vader at all; there was a memory at the forefront, his grandfather’s helmet grasped tightly in his hand. The room beyond was destroyed, the telltale signs of lightsaber slashes still alight with glowing embers. Rey could feel the light and dark at war within him. His voice was lamenting and strained. Lost. “Show me, Grandfather,” he begged the helmet. “Who you were. Please.”

There was another thought whittling away at his convictions.

*Who am I?*

She pushed through to another memory. It was likely immediately after he made it safely back from Mustafar. He was sitting on the counter in the refresher, treating a mangled wound on his back with supplies from a medpac. A flame of anger prickled under her skin as she understood that he had been injured and said nothing. No, not only did he say nothing, but he undeniably hid it from her. Had he hidden it from her in the refresher? Or had the evidence disappeared with the wound? He was certainly capable of repairing his wounds; he probably had sufficient enough practice in all of the years of being the First Order’s primary enforcer. Still, it irked her. Was he trying to protect her or did he not trust her in his vulnerability?

After he finished dressing the wound with a Bacta patch, he lifted an odd-looking crystal from where it was sitting on the counter next to him. It appeared to have been birthed from a red meteorite. She remembered the holocron he had fixated upon retrieving, and his purpose in that Treasure Room on Mustafar made more sense. He must have hidden it in a pocket in his robes before they were connected. There was a generous amount of blood on the crystal, and she presumed it was the source of his wound. Perhaps the injury had occurred during the fall.

Kylo closed his eyes, and his thoughts turned dark. *Monster. Child. Failure. Emotional. Weak. Burden. Light. Dark. Unlovable.* The words echoed in several distinct voices, including her own, drawing the darkness. It was efficient, almost…rehearsed. She felt the shadows surround him in
the Force like a wraithlike shawl. Focusing the darkness into the holocron, his efforts were rewarded when it began to glow.

*Kam kash zhōl anas tu svajone?* Somehow, she knew the language without *knowing* it. She would have assumed from Kylo, but his thoughts were equally as perplexed. *What is it that you desire?*

“I am searching for knowledge of *Force Destiny,*” he said firmly.

*Nie.*

No.

“Give me the knowledge I seek!”

*Niekada, Jidai*

*Never, Jedi.*

Kylo jerked his consciousness away from the connection with the holocron. His breath was uneven as he shuddered, but fear of the consequences if he failed and anger at his weakness in the dark side worked in his favor, absorbing the darkness around him.

There were more flashes of memories—at least two dozen attempts since Mustafar at various hours and states of dress. Every single one of them ended the same as the last; in failure. The final attempt was in the same training room he had taught her about the Force. She wondered if it had occurred just after their connection had closed, as his emotions felt especially tumultuous.

He pushed for more darkness, recalling painful memories to aid in his objective—the memory of his parents leaving him at Luke’s temple, the day he discovered his familial relation to Darth Vader, the night his uncle held a lightsaber over him in his sleep, the death of Dev and the others, the fight when Jacen attempted to kill him, the moment he killed his father, the fateful day in the throne room when Snoke—Sidious—revealed that he was the architect of their bond. In every memory, she could feel the profound love he had to give, but betrayal left him sharpening that love into a weapon, allowing it to fester in his anger until it became hate.
There were memories of Rey, too—when she reached for the lightsaber instead of his hand, when she shut the door on his father’s ship, when she kissed Poe, when she almost killed him in his sleep, when she told her friends lies about him in the war room, when she betrayed him with the vial, and every cruel word she had ever said to him. The flashes of memories were well organized, as if he had used them repeatedly before in his pursuit of darkness…. and it worked. He shivered as he breathed it all in. His thoughts were heavy and muddled with the oppressive shadow of the dark.

*It has to be enough.*

He was ready. With fingers trembling in rage, he reconnected with the holocron, projecting every ounce of darkness he had into it.

*Kam kash zhol anas tu svajone?* The slimy voice asked again. *What is it that you desire?*

“Knowledge of *Force Destiny.*”

*Tu aras nie Tsis. Nu ziur tu’iea irus, Jidai.* It laughed. *You are no Sith. I see your light, Jedi.*

“No…” he whispered. “No!” He pivoted and propelled the holocron at a mirror that ran the length of the training room. As the shards of glass crashed to the floor around him, he screamed in a ferocity that would have once frightened her. It wasn’t until the room was silent that he noticed the blue bolts of electricity sparking between his fingers. Kylo stared down at his hands in wonder.

The implications should have terrified her, but her thoughts were far away from his newfound Force ability. Rey was… conflicted. If there was ever a time that Kylo could use his darkness for good, it was then. They needed the information from the holocron to stop Sidious from returning; it would have benefitted them all if he had succeeded. But the holocron had sensed the good she knew was inside him. Would he see it now, too? Had he already seen it, over those numerous attempts? Was that what led to those consequential words? Were they the truth?

Her excitement was short-lived. His mind had pushed her through to the next memory, a more recent memory. He was in his training room, and he was singularly focused. It was obvious to her that he hadn’t been sleeping or eating—or much of anything besides driving his muscles beyond the point of exhaustion. The training room had become his entire existence. It was undoubtedly clear that he had intentionally shut her out.
Rey could feel how cutting himself off from the bond was torturing him. He was even more unbalanced, had less control over the ebb and flow of the darkness. He was unstable in ways he had been when she first had met him, allowing the fear and anger to drive him. She could feel his soul calling out to her, craving her light, but he shoved the feeling from his thoughts the best he could.

The thoughts he did allow were chaotic. He felt fear. He feared what he had become on Mustafar, what he had almost done to her in darkness, but there was also fear toward the light he could never extinguish. The dark was strong enough in him to nearly kill her, but not strong enough to save her. The ancient words taunted him relentlessly. He felt shame for not defeating Maul and knowing that he would fall if he faced him alone. He felt helpless in stopping Sidious and the Dark Army if he didn't destroy Force Destiny and the second machine. It all culminated in a desperation to be strong enough. The only question was how.

He stood in the center of the training room, absorbing larger quantities of darkness. There was a memory he had locked onto, a sharp, biting feeling that he was attempting to replicate. His lightsaber hissed and crackled as he held it out in front of him. His other hand aimed at the plasma of his blade; gloveless, open, and poised for... something significant. His breathing was centered and meditative, he was preparing himself in the Force.

There was a volatile ball of energy building inside his chest that he struggled to control. She felt the energy drawn from every cell in his body. He channeled a pathway from his fingertips and released the pressure in an explosion of electricity. Blue sparks of lightning burst wildly from his hand, arcing into the blade of his lightsaber. He groaned through gritted teeth, attempting to restrain the immense blast of energy that was draining quickly from his body.

Releasing the energy, he wavered on his feet. He blinked repeatedly as his eyes lost focus and darkness seeped into the edges of his vision. As he grasped onto the Force to remain upright, he didn’t block or release the darkness, allowing it to flood inside him unabated. In the last second of consciousness, his barriers fell completely, and a familiar presence slithered its way inside.

There was something there, another memory; an older one. She pushed farther, more forcibly, until she was dragged down into it with him. It was the same memory he had focused on earlier, and it became increasingly clear who else was involved.

Snoke.

No, she reminded herself. Not Snoke anymore. Sidious. The presence had latched on, claws deep into the memory, making it thick with darkness. Why did Ben go to that awful memory? That has to be where Sidious found his way in again! What was he thinking!
Without fear for herself, she pushed forward into the memory. She found herself in a brightly lit training room, different than any other she had observed through the bond. Sidious, in the form of Snoke, stood towering over Kylo. The sadistic smile plastered across the creature’s face faded in and out of focus as Kylo convulsed on the floor. Blue bolts of lightning blasted from Sidious’ fingertips, thrashing through the younger man’s weakened body. Kylo’s teeth were clenched, battling against his lungs’ inability to expand. His only thoughts oscillated between fighting and letting go. As the relief of unconsciousness began to soothe his senses, Sidious ended the onslaught of energy.

Kylo’s body screamed as he turned to his side. He gasped desperately for air.

“You are weak,” Sidious sneered. “This can all end, Kylo Ren. All you must do is overcome your pathetic seduction to the light and your childish dreams of a false hope! Let go of the delusions that cripple you! It is the only way you can become what you are meant to be. Use the darkness to find strength. This can all end if you just...let...go!”

To augment his point, Sidious flicked his wrist and knocked Kylo onto his back again. Darkness seeped into her bondmate’s heart as he rolled his head in a daze. There was a light, a young girl, illuminating the darkness of his mind. *It’s not too late*, the girl’s voice—her voice—whispered. Sidious sneered as he sensed the pull to the hope inside Kylo and resumed his lightning torture. By pure instinct, Kylo lifted his hands to protect himself from the torture. He surprised them both by absorbing and manipulating some of the energy in his hands. *That* was what her bondmate had been focusing on in his training, Rey realized. That moment was a memory of the past.

Sidious easily overwhelmed him with a stronger blast, and the blue arcs of energy seized through his body again. In between bursts, her bondmate cried out in pain. As Kylo in the memory screamed, Kylo screamed in his mind. It was then that she understood what Sidious had done. This memory may have happened in the past, but Sidious was using it to keep Kylo imprisoned in his own mind.

“Wake up, Ben! Wake up!” she shouted. Her words pulled her further into his consciousness. She found herself standing in the room next to Sidious. Weaponless, she lunged for the monster, altering his trajectory enough that the screaming stopped. Before she could further engage the monster, she was thrown back with the Force.

“I should have killed you myself...” the creature growled. “Long ago.” She saw the blue arcs before she heard their crackle. She had been thrown backward onto the ground, feeling nothing but the violent clenching of every muscle for several long seconds before it all abruptly stopped. In the absence of the lightning, the blinding, all-consuming pain set in. It was almost a relief when the onslaught began again. She couldn’t scream. It felt like her chest was in a vise, the pressure forcing the air out of her lungs, but not allowing her to take the deep breath she required. There were no rational thoughts of how to escape, not that she could have if she tried; her body was no longer
under her control. Jolting pain was her entire existence, the millisecond between the spasming of each muscle her only concept of time. A solid weight wrapped around her arm, and then she felt a different energy flowing into her.

Rey panicked. She couldn't move. The familiar comfort of the Force surrounding her helped her understand the situation. Kylo had paralyzed her muscles, ensuring her body was unable to physically react to the lightning. It only lasted a few seconds before he became the focus of Sidious's wrath, but it was enough respite for her to find the strength to breathe. He released his hold on her, both physically and through the Force. There was a hopelessness she felt as she groaned in pain. They were prisoners to Sidious's darkness. She turned to her side to find Kylo facing her, curled in on himself. His eyes were clenched shut as his body seized through the attack. Rey wondered how the real memory had ended.

"Ben!"

Rey reached for him, wrapping her hand around his trembling fist. The electricity passed through him and into her, but she hoped it was enough to allow him a brief respite. His eyelids flickered open and his fervent stare met hers. His throat bobbed as he tried to speak, but his eyes said enough. He was grateful she had come for him, but he wanted her to leave him even though he knew she wouldn’t. She slipped her fingers into his hand and he gripped it tighter as their bodies seized through another wave of torment. How much longer could they survive this?

Closing her eyes, Rey pushed herself deeper into the Force. It was a dream, controlled by Sidious; would her powers even work there? She imagined creating a strong barrier between them and the monster. The sharp, burning pain returned as her muscles relaxed. Relief shuddered through her at the sound of Kylo’s heaving breaths. Rey opened her eyes to the shimmering blue translucence of a Force shield. The lightning arced back at Sidious, and he directed it away before it struck him.

"Ren is mine," he sneered.

Rey stood weakly, moving with shaking limbs in front of Kylo’s prone form. Standing defiantly, as she had once done in a throne room, she swallowed her fear. “I think Ben proved with your death that he is not.”

The creature laughed humorlessly. “You think he’s yours, orphan girl?”

“No, Ben belongs to no one.” Rey didn’t have to see Kylo’s face to feel his hopeful emotions over the bond. It was a simple concept to most; not belonging to someone. But Rey had lived under the control of a terrible creature; she understood all too well the freedom of taking back her own
identity. Maybe she could help him see it, too; maybe it would help him find his way back to Ben.

“That’s where you’re wrong. He was mine, and he will be again,” the monster promised. “It’s only a matter of time, child. Once his army kills your friends, you’ll leave him, just like his family. Won’t you?”

Kylo pushed himself off the ground behind her. She felt the pull on the Force around them as he stood. “No,” she said. “You’re wrong. About Ben. And me.” Rey didn’t turn back to see Kylo’s reaction, but by the look of disgust on the creature’s face, it wasn’t what he had been expecting.

Sidious doubled down, stepping closer to her Force shield. Was it enough to keep him at bay? “Once I return, he will lead my Dark Army. It is his destiny. You have no future with him. What could you possibly want him for? The power of his bloodline? Offspring? Tell her, Kylo Ren, what the lightning has all but ensured; tell her about your sterility. The plague of the Skywalkers ends with him. He sold his body, his mind, and his soul to me long ago, little orphan girl; you can't save him.”

Rey stood her ground. “I don’t care who he was… I know who he is. You’re right; I can’t save him, that’s his choice, but I can protect him from you.”

“You saw what I could do on Mustafar, what I can make him do,” the creature said, stepping closer to pass through the shield and tower over her. She stood before him, meeting his piercing gaze, her chin high in defiance. “He is powerless under my control. I will use the darkness against him. I will not stop until his life is mine. Do you want to be the one to stand in my way? Lose your own life? For him?”

“Whatever it takes to stop you.”

“Is this because of the vision of the future you saw with my young apprentice before you came for him?” He laughed cruelly as he held her gaze. “It was I, young fool, who created that vision. It led you straight to him and led you straight to me. If not for the weakness of young Solo, I would have finally been rid of your interference. But no matter. Do you wish to see how this truly ends? I have foreseen it, in the World Between Worlds.”

“No,” she said, but it wasn’t the truth. The future that vision had promised was what gave her hope when his destiny seemed all but certain. If it had been a manipulation from Sidious, it would make the vision they shared before Kamino as grim as she feared. She knew the monster sensed her hesitation. It wasn’t a surprise when the obsidian floor fell away to a dark room. There was a flashing red light above her head. She had seen this room before, in a dream.
Kylo’s voice echoed in the darkness. “You know what I have to do.”

As she stepped closer, she could see herself with Kylo. Sidious stood by, watching them. His hand was raised, and, somehow, she knew he was controlling her bondmate as he had on Mustafar. Kylo’s eyes were black with darkness. Both of their hands were gripping a lightsaber between them. He groaned in his effort to wrench it away from her. Rey watched herself cry out as she fought to maintain control over the weapon. It reminded her of a struggle between a son and a father on a skyway.

Rey rushed forward to stop them. When she was nearly upon them, the flash of a lightsaber brightened between them.

“No!” she screamed, skidding to a stop.

“Yes,” the creature cackled behind her. Before she could see who had won the struggle, she found herself back inside the brightly lit training room. “If you continue along this path, it will come to pass,” the creature assured her. “Your only choice is whether you direct that blade into him… or he directs it into you.”

Rey turned to meet her bondmate’s eyes. They were wet with conflicting emotions. He had seen it, too. She turned back to Sidious. “What will be, will be,” she said. “But I’ll never stop fighting for him.”

“This isn't your place!” Sidious yelled, and Rey realized it was the first time she had heard him raise his voice. He was always in control, but she wouldn’t allow it. She did not cower from him; she did not fear him. The creature moved closer. “Your place is with the Jedi, not a worthless scion.”

“My place will always be right here,” she said, standing between him and the man she loved.

“We shall see,” the creature drawled with a smile. “You will stand by him, but after he knows the truth, will he stand by you?”

With a flick of the Force, and an ease that should have been terrifying, Sidious turned her to face her bondmate. Kylo looked as if he had risen from the dead. His eyes were bloodshot, his face pale, and his body trembled from the electrical energy still twitching through his muscles. He was still
pulling on the Force to stand. There was an apology in his eyes when he stared at her. The creature
circled them predatorily until he came to stand behind Kylo. “Will you stand with her, my young
apprentice, when you discover she is no better than your family? She lied to you.
She betrayed you. But power never lies, power never –”

“That’s enough!” Kylo shouted as he turned. His posture presented defiance, but the bond
shuddered with fear. He looked like a young boy rebelling against a father figure. Perhaps, in a
way he was. Had he truly killed someone that he looked up to like a father… for her? Rey had
never thought of it that way, but perhaps her bondmate did. As the creature continued his circle,
Kylo shifted to follow, fingers itching at his side for a lightsaber that wasn’t there. His eyes were
wide, as if it were the first time he had dared raise his voice to the creature or openly defy him.
Emboldened by his newfound strength, he continued. “I will always choose her over you. Always.
I don’t care what she’s done.”

“Oh?” Sidious’s tone was light with levity, but his eyes were piercing with fury that Kylo dared to
oppose him. “But you don’t know the truth. You don’t know her true relationship with her
general.”

Kylo’s face was unreadable, but his words conveyed the loyalty he held for her. “You’re wasting
your breath. I saw their kiss, I heard her words to him, I know she gave him the vial. I don’t care.
You can’t turn me against her.”

The creature chuckled, turning his attention toward her. There was something knowing in his eyes
that frightened her. “He thinks he knows the truth,” he said, clearly enjoying the turn of events.
“Tell Kylo Ren who you had tea with after he healed you in the refresher. Tell him about the
conversation he interrupted when he appeared after he had spared those prisoners. Tell him who
you were fantasizing about when Kylo put that braid in your hair. Tell him the First Order secrets
you shared with your general.”

“Lies!” Kylo spat in anger. It should have warmed her heart that he trusted her so completely he
didn’t even glance her way to study her reaction to the accusation. The problem was, though there
were blatant lies, there was a flicker of truth. Why hadn’t she told him yet?

“She was back in his arms the instant he returned from his mission on Kamino,” Sidious continued,
twisting the truth with lies until it was impossible to separate. “Tell him, Rey.”

The guilt churned in her stomach as Kylo blindly defended her. “No! You’re a liar! She wouldn’t
do that, not after what he did.”
The room fell silent as Kylo’s words echoed in consequence. Kylo knew her, he knew she wouldn’t do that with Poe. Rey could deny it all, and Kylo would believe her, but she couldn’t lie to the man she loved. He, of all people, deserved better than that. She had told Poe about Force Destiny and the Dark Army to protect the Resistance. She forced herself to find the words she knew would rattle his trust in her. All she could manage was, “Ben.”

His eyes, full of reassurance and certainty, found hers and hesitated. Her heart clenched. She knew he saw the conflict in hers as the trust in his faded. “Rey?”

The first tear escaped down her cheek. His features twisted in agony for a moment before he hardened his face into an impassive mask. His emotions, however, mirrored the betrayal and despair she had felt in him in the war room when she had kissed Poe. She shook her head. “It wasn’t like that.”

“But you were with him,” he finished for her. “As if what he did to you doesn’t matter. He used you, Rey, like I told you he would! You’re a fool if you believe he isn’t using you still! Why can’t you see that he needs you to win his war?” He paused as an icy awareness settled over his features. “That tea in the storage room – did he make it for you when he asked you to betray me? Again?”

“The tea was a peace offering after he betrayed me with that vial!” Rey could feel the barriers in his mind shutting her out. She wondered if he did shut her out, if it would close the connection, leaving him alone with Sidious as the creature wanted.

“And you…” Kylo’s voice broke under the weight of his words, “after you knew what he did with it on Kamino, you still gave him everything he wanted. As I defied my general, were you… yielding to yours?”

Rey fought against her invisible restraints as another tear fell. “I told you it wasn’t like that!”

“Wasn’t it?” he asked, voice low. His eyes no longer watched the monster that stalked around them. “If you trust him, you’re either naïve, stupid or a traitor. Which one is it?”

Stepping away under the weight of his cruel words, darkness clouded Kylo’s eyes, and Sidious circled him, smiling victoriously. Rey wouldn’t accept defeat—not ever. “I didn’t know Pow would be there. He made me the tea as an apology and I accepted it because I needed him to trust me. He didn’t ask me to betray you, he said he needed your “help,” but no, I’m not stupid, Ben. I don’t trust him. I would never let him anywhere near you. But you have no idea what it’s like. I’m caught between being loyal to you and being loyal to the people your army is trying to kill. What
Poe did to me and those clones is unforgivable, but, without you, he is still the best chance the Resistance has at winning the war. I can still hate him and know that this is not something I should keep from the Resistance. You put me in a place where I have to choose between betraying you and saving their lives. I won’t let them die.”

“What did you tell him, Rey?”

She remembered, of course, what she had told her general to delay his suspicion and refocus his attention away from Kylo. After giving him the vial, she knew how it would look to her bondmate. It would have looked the same to her. If he felt betrayed that she was still on speaking terms with Poe, this would shatter his limited trust in her. It was in everyone’s best interest that she didn’t tell him, but she owed him the truth.

“I told him about Force Destiny and the Dark Army,” she answered through tears. Kylo turned his head, refusing to look at her. “Ben, please, this is the fate of the galaxy! This isn’t me against you, it’s us against them! We can’t do this alone! We need their help against Sidious’s army!” Rey wanted to run to him, but the Force still held her captive. All she could do was watch him as he pulled farther away from the bond. The silence that followed was piercing and oppressive and terrifying.

When he finally did speak, his dispassionate words surprised her. “It’s not going to work, Sidious; you can’t turn me against her. I don’t care.” It would have given her hope if she didn’t feel his emotions over the bond. He did care. Profoundly. Her fingers itched to strangle the creature that was tearing them apart.

“What about Rey? Will she stand by you?” Sidious said, his attention turning to her. “Tell her, Supreme Leader, what world the First Order invaded while she was rolling in the bedsheets with her general?”

Kylo winced at the fabricated picture the monster had painted, but didn’t hesitate to answer, though he still refused to meet her pleading stare. “Barkhesh.”

Rey had known they had set course there. It hurt to imagine that he had brought his army to a Resistance base, not knowing if her friends truly had escaped, but Sidious hadn’t revealed anything new. She was going to tell the creature as much when he continued, “Tell her where you demanded your army search when they found no trace of the Resistance.”

“I knew they weren’t –”
“Tell her,” the creature demanded.

Kylo’s jaw hardened before he inevitably answered. “The temple.”

One moment her gut was twisting with remorse, the next, she was in shock. Darkness found her as her trust faded. She shook her head. It was impossible. He wouldn’t do that. If his army couldn’t find them, then why would he direct them specifically to the temple? Unless… unless he believed some of them might have still been there. Unless he wanted them dead. “You told them about the temple?”

“Yes.”

**Why?**

The sting in her chest forced her to grit her teeth to swallow a sob. He couldn’t have known for certain that her friends weren’t there. What if Finn, or Maz, or one of the others had stayed behind? He would have killed her friends after all his promises that they were safe. The darkness coaxed her to tell him as much, but the monster’s movements to her left reminded her that it wasn’t the time. She couldn’t allow Sidious to win. “I don’t care,” she lied, repeating her bondmate’s words.

Kylo finally dragged his stormy gaze up to hers, evidently as surprised by her reaction as she had been by his. Sidious, however, was undeterred. He circled them again until he came to rest behind her. The Force was still wrapped tightly around her so she couldn’t turn to keep him in her sights.

“You don’t care?” Sidious repeated from out of sight. “Let us up the stakes then, shall we? I think he will care when you tell him the secret of the whispers in the darkness of your mind.” Rey’s stomach dropped. The anger and disappointment were replaced by primal, all-consuming fear. She didn’t care what he had done, or how angry she was with him. This was different. This would destroy him. “Tell your ‘Ben,’” Sidious prompted, “who you’ve been hiding from him.” Rey didn’t have to look at the creature to know he was smiling.

Kylo had worn a mask of impassivity until that very moment, when it was pierced by Sidious’s words. His stare jumped between her and his former master. Rey knew he was far less trustful this time as dread saturated the Force around them. Sidious breathed it in, licking his lips as if he tasted it. There was nothing she could say to ease his fear as the implication became more apparent with each passing second. His expression was pained as he braced himself for her answer. “Rey?” It wasn’t a question, it was a warning; everything would change if she gave life to a single
Rey shook her head. *Please don’t, Ben. I don’t want to hurt you.* She couldn’t do this to him, not ever, but especially not in front of Sidious.

“I always knew you were weak, Kylo Ren, but naïve?” Sidious hissed. If she could move, she would have killed him again herself. He had promised that as long as she kept that secret, Kylo would never know. He *lied.* Why had she trusted the creature? She should have told Kylo when she had the chance, before he said his next damning words. “You knew the darkness wasn’t hers; you knew it felt strangely familiar, but you couldn’t place it… or you didn’t want to. See past your denial. Who do you think whispered in her head to convince her to kill you? Where do you think she found that darkness? Who do you think your bond allowed in?”

Kylo’s stare flashed back to hers. She knew he would find the accuracy of the creature’s words there. Kylo shut his eyes in a futile attempt to shut out the truth. He shook his head frantically, his fists trembling as he waited for the words that would test the limited restraint of his power. She was losing him as fast as he was losing control. Everything in her pleaded to run away again, to spare them both the agony of the truth. But there was no escaping it this time; Kylo was better off hearing it from her than that monster.

*I’m sorry.*

“No!” His eyes snapped open as if he’d heard her. His desperate gaze searched for something in hers to refute Sidious’s claims. The consequences could be catastrophic, and Rey wondered what a Jedi would have done. *Only act when you can maintain balance,* Luke had told her on Ahch-To, *even if people get hurt.* This could change the tide of the war, in Sidious’s favor. It would benefit the galaxy to lie. It would benefit *him.* But she couldn’t do that to him; she loved him, even if she was terrible at showing it. Words were stuck in her throat, but it turned out she didn’t need them. Despair twisted through his features in understanding. “Then this is… real? This isn’t the guilt and fear of your conscience …or mine… this isn’t a dream. This is him? Sidious?”

She nodded, wiping hot tears from her cheeks. Kylo released a stuttered breath and turned away. “I *killed* him. It’s impossible. This is a dream… a nightmare! He couldn’t….”

“I couldn’t return?” Sidious finished for him. She could hear both a smile and a sneer in the monster’s voice. A shiver ran down her spine. He had controlled them both from the beginning. How could they ever hope to defeat him? “You truly are hopeless, Kylo Ren. Did you learn nothing about the Force? There is no death. You knew Skywalker was strong enough to find you in the Force; what made you think I wouldn’t be? Did you believe in your *vanity* that I would return to you first? When I didn’t, did you grow complacent? It’s a shame the general had to reveal
the plan for *Force Destiny* in his arrogance. I would have enjoyed doing this in person.”

Kylo shook his head, desperate to hold onto the denial. Sidious only pressed further. “You can kill me, but you cannot defeat me. I told you, I cannot be betrayed, I cannot be beaten, I will rise again.” When Kylo turned back to her with the most profound fear she had ever seen in his eyes, she braced herself.

*He knows the truth.*

Rey expected… distress; pleading words, an impetuous outburst in the Force, violent shaking, screaming, *something*. The sudden change in him was as unpredictable as he was. On an inhale the despair was clear enough on his face that she would have felt it without the bond. On the exhale, it was gone, his expression vacant and lifeless after the loss of everything else. There was a dubious calm that settled over him. The tumultuous emotions disintegrated as if they were never there. Kylo could become apoplectic in his rage, but this felt more like apathy. It didn’t make sense.

Kylo’s stare became cold and hopeless as he turned to his former master. She had never been more terrified than in that moment. She was pleading for screaming and Force explosions and lightsaber destruction, because at least then she would know where they stood. “You’re back,” he whispered, more to himself than anyone else. The words were hollow. “You’re back. It’s too late. It’s over. You’re right; you can’t be beaten.”

“But, that’s not true—”

“This is all your fault, Kylo Ren.” The creature’s voice startled her. Her concentration had been so singularly focused on the emotions, or lack thereof, of her bondmate that she forgot there was a third person in the room. “After the betrayal at the hands of your grandfather, I had to ensure it would never happen again. This was more than just building an Empire; it was obtaining all the knowledge of all the worlds, especially the Unknown Regions. Your missions there helped me obtain it. You see, I prepared for my death long before you killed me.

“Only death allowed me the chance to finally access the entrance into the World Between Worlds. I have greater power now than I could ever have possessed alive; I can tap into any mind, control them through their darkness. I cannot be defeated, because I am inhibited by none of the limitations or weaknesses of mortality. My Empire is the galaxy, but my battleground is in here,” he said, tapping his temple with a gnarled finger. “When you fulfilled the role of the apprentice usurping his master, you gave me *everything*. You would have my gratitude if you had done it for *power*. But you took my life to save Skywalker’s apprentice. You couldn’t be trusted in your blind loyalty to her. I saw your mind, I knew your every intent, I *allowed* you to kill me.”
Rey knew it was a lie; she had seen the shock on the monster’s face in the throne room. Kylo, however, didn’t seem as confident in the truth as Sidious continued to poison him against her. “I had hoped when she inevitably abandoned you for her friends, the act would make you stronger. Unfortunately, I was wrong. You weren’t even worthy enough to gain knowledge from a holocron! You failed!” the creature shouted, and Kylo bowed his head, accepting the reproach. “You should have asked me, child. Even after what you have done, I am still your master. I would have told you that taking your lightsaber to the Kyber crystal would be enough to destroy the machine. I would have trusted you, I have trusted you with my fate. Will you trust me with yours?”

“Why would he trust you! You used him to—”

“Silence!” Sidious demanded of her. He turned back to her bondmate, a new vehemence to his tone. “You needed to see that your talents were being wasted as Supreme Leader. Your place is on the battlefield; your destiny is as the commander of my Dark Army. You, Kylo Ren, can be more powerful than the Force itself. But you had to learn first. You needed to see your sentiment for what it was—foolish. I tried to protect you from the lies and betrayal of your family, but you wouldn’t listen until they almost killed you. Hence when I returned, I found her instead, almost immediately after your failure on Crait. She shut you out, she pushed you away, long before she let me in. She didn’t want you until she needed your help. My plan is, and has always been, for you to see her for what she is: a champion for the Resistance who is using you for your power. I knew the only way to do that was to show you that she is no different than them.”

“Don’t listen to his lies,” she begged her bondmate, but his eyes were fixed on the monster. “He is the one who told me to kill you!”

Sidious grinned cruelly. “Vader did not see Luke for the hypocrite he was, but you’re smarter; that is why I made you master of the Knights of Ren. You know the truth; I didn’t control her, she listened. I didn’t lie, I didn’t betray you like your family; she did. She doesn’t love you, boy; look at you. You’re everything she hates and is fighting against. I did you a favor when I suggested she kill you. I did it to prove who she was, that her allegiance to you was solely for the benefit of the Resistance and your mother. You only believed me after Skywalker tried to kill you, so I proved she was no different. I did it to show you the truth! It would have been enough to return your heart to darkness, where it belongs. If she killed you, I would have given you the ultimate knowledge of the World Between Worlds. I would have had you resurrected by my side with Force Destiny. Even after you took my life, I still believe in your potential when no one else will. It is too late for her foolish dream of ‘Ben’—you know that—but it’s not too late for Kylo Ren to fulfill his destiny with my Dark Army. Swear loyalty to me, and you will find your place through the destruction of the anarchists. I can give you peace, power, and immortality.”

Kylo was silent, but his eyes were not. They were cold with darkness.

“Ben?” Rey cried. Her greatest fear was being realized. She had kept this secret from him to
prevent Sidious from returning to his mind, but by keeping it from him, she had played right into Sidious’s hand. She had made the same mistake his parents had. The creature had a way of blending truth and lies so seamlessly that it was impossible to pull them apart. She had fallen victim to his logic; she wasn’t naïve enough this time to believe her bondmate couldn’t be dragged right back into the darkness.

Kylo turned to her, his expression unreadable. His emotions, however, no longer resembled anything close to apathy. His energy felt like the entire galaxy had been compressed into a small box, and he was struggling with all his might in a losing battle to restrain it. She had been granted her wish; he was falling apart, his eyes drowning in pain, his body shaking with tension. His emotions were collapsing, expanding, condensing, and colliding over the bond like a mercurial nebula of stars. Everything she could feel from him was jagged edges, as if the man had shattered and been put indiscriminately back together.

Rey had always seen him as purely wild, volatile, and unchecked, but allowing herself the chance to truly study him, she saw the incredible amount of restraint he did possess. That restraint mattered little at the moment when the barely contained raw power she felt from him bordered on explosive. Between sharp, shuddering breaths, he managed to whisper, “Tell me the truth, Rey. Please.”

The way he said that word—please—reminded her of the last time the three of them had been in the same room. The desperation in his voice when he said it had a way of tearing her heart to pieces. Or perhaps, every time he was despondent enough to vehemently beseech her with that one last word of vulnerability and hope, her heart was already breaking, and it was the final blow. His words were simple, his eyes conveyed everything else.

_This is it_, they said, _the only chance I’ll give you. All I’ve ever wanted from you is the truth. I think you owe me that much._ Closing her eyes, she exhaled slowly. When she reopened them, she dried the tears from her cheeks and drew strength from the Force. She was strong, a warrior, a survivor. No matter the consequences of her words, she could do this.

“I love you,” she said first, because if he wanted the truth, then he would have to hear all of it. “That’s the reason I want you, that’s the reason I care what happens to you, and that’s why I’m telling you the truth right now. If I cared more about saving the galaxy or my friends, I would lie, because I’m terrified that this is when I lose you. And if it is, my regret isn’t that I can’t turn you to save my friends, it’s that he’ll be back inside your head. I know what that did to you. I wanted to carry that burden, so you didn’t have to.”

She raised her hand to silence the argument she could feel forming across the bond. “At first, I didn’t know it was him. I thought it was a whisper of the Force. He took my thoughts and the truth and twisted them until I couldn’t see the lies in the darkness. I knew it was wrong after the darkness faded, but I kept listening. I made mistakes, I used you, I pushed you away, I almost killed you, Ben, and nothing will ever make that okay. But even when I thought I hated you the
most, even when it would have benefitted the Resistance, I couldn’t kill you. And somewhere between knowing you through your memories and lying with you under the stars, I fell in love with you. I promise you, Ben, I’m not lying about my feelings for you… he is. Please believe me. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“No! You can’t just say you’re sorry!” His chest heaved, his eyes were wet with emotion, and he was shouting, but he hadn’t shut down yet. It gave her hope that maybe it wasn’t too late. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t know until that night I almost killed you,” she explained, keeping her gaze fixed on his. She needed him to see the truth. “I knew when I heard his voice in your memories. Once I knew, I tried to shut out the darkness. When you told me about Force Destiny, I knew I had to tell you, but… I never had the chance.”

There was resentment in his eyes, but she would take it over cold detachment, apathy, burning hatred, or even the devastation she had seen in his eyes earlier. She deserved for him to be angry with her, but his eyes were still on her and not his former master. That had to count for something. “You’ve seen me a dozen times since then; why didn’t you tell me!”

“I wanted to tell you, but I was… scared!” she cried, pleading with him to understand… to forgive, something she knew he did not do. “He said if I didn’t tell you, then you would be safe from him! I was a fool and believed him!”

“The truth is, she doesn’t trust you,” the monster said as he continued to circle them. “Even though you killed me for her, it will never be good enough. She already proved she would never join you because you will never be good enough. Their victory is dependent upon you, just ask her. Or ask her who she will choose if you don’t turn. She will kill you if she can’t seduce you to the light. She has the pilot to keep her warm at night; she doesn’t need you. What can you offer her other than your power? I’ve only ever told you the truth, my young apprentice, that is why I am here. That is why she kept me from you; she feared this moment because she knew I would reveal her lies.”

“That’s not true, Ben! You know that’s not true!”

“Isn’t it?” Her heart sank with his words. Kylo’s voice sounded more distant by the moment. “If the battle for the galaxy was tomorrow, who would you choose, Rey? Can you stand there and tell me you wouldn’t kill me?”

“If you were the commander of his Dark Army, can you stand there and tell me you wouldn’t kill me?” she challenged.
Rey’s focus remained on her bondmate, but she tracked Sidious’ movements in the Force. He was stalking slowly, watching them intently, waiting for the right moment to interject again and drive them apart. She could see his game for what it was, but could her bondmate? “I didn’t kill you on Mustafar.” Kylo answered.

It was a deflection from the true question, but she chose to use it against him instead. “Because I refused to fight you.”

“It’s a simple question,” he said through clenched teeth. “Would you kill me, Rey?”

Sidious grinned wickedly as he passed behind Kylo. He knew as well as she did that if she lied, Kylo would know, and if she told the truth, it would push Kylo closer to his former master. “It would be the hardest thing I ever had to do,” she said, “but if you held your blade to Finn’s throat, I would do what I had to do to stop you.”

It was the answer he was expecting, of course, but he jolted as if she had struck him anyway. Kylo lifted his hand. At first, she feared he would use the Force against her, but he just held it up as he attempted to steady his breathing. He lowered his head and stood deathly still as his eyes lost focus. He panted quietly for a moment, and she thought he had stabilized his emotions, but he suddenly turned and screamed into the training room. The loud, agonized cry echoed around them all.

Rey wanted to give him a moment to calm his emotions before they overwhelmed them in the Force, but he had gone quiet. Too quiet. He may have been “Ben” to her, but he was still Kylo Ren. He was still a beautiful, but deadly, creature of darkness. In the jungle, in the moments before encountering other creatures of darkness, silence would precede them. It was as if all the other animals held their collective breath in anticipation. In the darkness of the jungle, silence was deadly. It was in Kylo Ren as well.

“Ben…”

“No,” Kylo answered, but his name had seemed to snap him back to reality. Sidious cackled as Kylo’s dark emotions immediately overwhelmed them in the Force. Her bondmate began pacing, his body shaking, though she certain that it was no longer the aftereffects of the lightning. Kylo’s eyes focused on the monster as the darkness surrounded him. He was lost, conflicted, tormented by his distrust in everyone. His thoughts were unraveling down a more resigned, fatalistic avenue. She was losing him.
"Fulfill your destiny, Kylo Ren," the creature said beguilingly. "Become what your grandfather always wanted you to be. Lead my army to bring order and stability to the galaxy. Guarantee that the Jedi and the Republic never return. Join me."

"What about the girl?" he murmured. Rey's stomach dropped and her heart clenched. He was falling back into the clutches of the monster. He had chosen on his own to be free of him, but her cruelty and lies and secrets had driven him back to the very fate he had been running from. Once Sidious had power over him again, he would never let him go. Rey knew that if she lost him now, she lost him forever. Her only hope was that he did care about her fate, enough for it to—for the moment—prevent him from falling back into darkness.

The creature was behind him again. When he spoke, he may have been addressing Kylo, but his eyes were fixed on her. "You've seen the truth; I won't ask you to kill her. We can spare the entire Resistance, send them into exile, which is a better fate than they would have given you. They will all be safe, and the war will be over... if you join me."

“Ben, look at me!” she shouted, breaking him from his downward spiral. “You know it’s not true! Sidious will never stop until we're dead! And if Poe held a blaster to your head, I would do what I had to do to stop him, too. When will you realize that I stand between you and my friends because I want to keep everyone safe? Since we’re exposing secrets, I was telling you the truth that even though I can’t join you at the First Order, after the war room, I can’t stand by the Resistance anymore, either. I’m loyal to people, not causes. I know it doesn’t make sense, but I kept this from you because I’m loyal to you. After seeing your memories, I never wanted you to feel his repulsive energy in your mind again. I did it for you, Ben, because I love you. One day you’ll just have to accept that.”

Kylo stared at her for a moment, his emotions unreadable. Please, Ben, please don't do this. I don't want to lose you. If you hate me, fine, but don't go back to him. Please. Typically, not being able to read him would have made her uneasy. After drowning in his oppressive emotions in the Force, however, the weakened energy gave her a guarded hope. Chewing his lip, he studied her carefully. His eyes were softer when he whispered. “I could have helped you if you just trusted me.”

And just like that, Rey had hope. She had hope that no matter how Kylo felt about her, he wouldn’t go back to his former master. Sidious’s lip curled at the change of events, his gnarled fists clenched in fury. He bit back his immediate retort and held her gaze as he searched for a different angle. Another grin twisted across his face. “You told her you killed her parents, and you expected her to trust you? Foolish child – you are her enemy.”

“He didn’t kill my parents!” she spat back at the creature.

“Oh, I know that,” the monster replied, too calmly, “and so does he. Kylo Ren, are you still naïve
enough to believe she cares for you? I’ll show you the truth. Tell her who killed her parents, tell her how you lied, and you’ll see what you are to her.”

The worst part of Sidious’s inciting comments was the truth interwoven into them. It was what made his lies so easily believable. The truth in this conversation had been the secrets they had kept from each other. Realistically, she knew that the opposite sides of the war had necessitated it, but it was an easy tool to drive them apart. This was different, however. This had nothing to do with the war. She knew Kylo hadn’t told her the truth about her parents, but Sidious made it seem as if the truth was worse than the awful lie he had told. “He’s right, Ben,” she said. “How could you be angry with me that I didn’t tell you about the whispers when you lied to me? You told me you would never lie to me.”

Kylo’s face was impassive, save for a slight twitch under his eye. “I didn’t lie.”

“You did!” she shouted. She knew Sidious was smiling, she knew it was what he wanted, but Kylo knew better than anyone how important knowledge of her parents was to her. And he had purposely lied about it. Why? This could be her only chance to learn the truth about her parents. “I know you didn’t kill them! By the time you fell to darkness, I had been alone on Jakku for nearly a decade! Ben Solo wouldn’t have killed my parents!”

Kylo stepped closer, more furious with her accusation than he had been over the significant secret she had kept from him. “I didn’t lie! You wanted to believe I did it, so I let you, but I never said anything that wasn’t true.”

Rey scoffed. The problem was, there was only honesty in his incensed gaze. Rey closed her eyes, searching for her memory of that day in the receiving hall.

“It was you,” she said.

*His eyes snapped open, glistening with unshed tears.* “No...” She had been so deeply immersed in darkness, so convinced that she was right before that she hadn’t felt the truth she saw now when reliving it.

*Rey shook her head. It all made sense. He had known what had happened to her parents, because he had been there. “That is why a vision of my past was so important to you; that is why you hid it from me.”*
“No,” he choked, “Please.” Believe me, his eyes had begged. I’m hiding something, but not this.

“You were there,” she said, ignoring his denial. “You did this.”

“I didn’t!” he yelled. “It was an accident!” It was a strange assertion. What was there to hide if it was an accident?

“It was you the whole time!” she screamed through tears. “It all makes sense now. You’re the one that sentenced me to a lifetime of loneliness. You’re the one who took everything from me. And all of this has been out of guilt for what you’ve done!”

“Rey!” He reached for her in desperation, begging her to understand.

“Don’t you ever touch me again, you monster.” His hand recoiled at her words, his body jolting as if she had fired upon him with her blaster. He swept at his eyes but refused to let her see any sorrow for what he had done. The fear faded as something like resolve passed across his features, but he didn’t say a word. His jaw was clenched, as were his fists, but the rest of his body was otherwise impassive. His barriers were high and fortified, but she could feel the heaviness of his emotions in the Force. He studied her face as if committing it to memory. He feared he would never see her again. Still, he said nothing. The darkness devoured her anger. “Tell me the truth,” she demanded.

Rey waited for the moment he had admitted it, the moment he had lied. His all-consuming stare rolled down to the floor. He worked his jaw for a moment, exhaling slowly before his gaze returned to hers. His eyes were wet, overflowing with emotion. “You already know the truth, what more do you want me to say?”

But she hadn’t known the truth! She believed a lie. How could he have let her believe something so terrible? “Why?” Her voice cracked as the tears escaped down her cheeks.

He held her stare. “You asked me that before—why did I do it? Why did I kill my father? Did it matter then? Does it matter now, Rey? It won’t bring any of them back.” She only realized then that it wasn’t an admission of guilt. It was another deflection, a side-step away from a topic he didn’t want to discuss. He hadn’t lied, only allowed her to believe a terrible untruth.

“I hate you, Kylo Ren,” she had said, and he had taken it, not saying a single word to defend himself. “You’ll pay for what you did. That’s a promise.”
Rey opened her eyes with a new truth in her heart. He hadn’t killed her parents. He hadn’t lied. But he had let her believe that lie, because he was more terrified of the truth. “What happened to my parents, Ben?”

He shook his head. “No, I can’t. You want me to say I did it, Rey? I’ll say I did it. I’ll lie. But I can’t do what you want me to do.” There was a shiver of trepidation that trickled down her spine. How could he prefer her hatred over the truth? Wasn’t the truth more important to him than anything else? If he wasn’t involved, then why did it matter to him? The secret clearly weighed heavily upon him, the reason he withheld it from her terrified her more than finally discovering what had happened to her family.

“I told you the truth Ben, please,” she begged him. She wished she could reach for him; touch his hand, feel the comfort of his warmth, anything to soothe the dread rising from the tiny voice inside telling her this would change everything. It was the same voice that had reminded her of the truth in the throne room. Everything inside her begged her to listen, but she had waited her entire life to learn the truth.

*I can’t let this go, Ben.*

“Don’t make me ask that monster.”

There was something in his eyes, something like empathy, that flashed through the betrayal, anger, fear, and torment. He lifted his chin, glancing away. “Let the past die,” he said, and it was the perfect presentation of the haughty Supreme Leader, but she felt the flare of uncertainty when his stare met his former master.

“Who killed my parents?” she pressed.

Though he intended to maintain an air of indifferent sovereignty, she heard the tinge of panic in his voice. “Let the past die, Rey.” His pretenses may have fooled the rest of the galaxy, but Rey knew him. He was terrified; deflecting and masquerading as everything she hated to force an argument. He would take her anger, her hatred, because the secret was worth protecting… or the person involved was.

*“Who are you protecting?”* she asked as she finally grasped why he had hidden it from her. The terror that overwhelmed every other emotion in his eyes was all she needed to know that she had assumed correctly. The problem was Rey couldn’t easily discern who the someone was that Kylo
believed was worth protecting. Everyone he had once loved, he had already betrayed. Why would he keep a secret for them?

“Is it Sidious?”

The creature chuckled as he came into her sight again, Kylo’s face twisted with disgust. “No,” he said, with such adamance that Rey didn’t doubt his answer for a second. Rey knew he hated the creature, but he had killed his father for him. If he had killed for him, then certainly he would have kept this secret for him. There were others he killed for, she reminded herself, maybe he would keep that secret for them.

“Jacen?”

When Kylo’s eyes darted to hers before glancing away again, she could see the anger burning in them. “Damn it, Rey…”

She felt the same anger over the bond. It wasn’t Jacen. It had made sense; they had been close and they belonged to the “Knights of Ren” together. Maybe Kylo would have protected him. The only other person that had been close to him was… “Dev?”

“Stop!” he shouted.

“Not until you tell me the truth!” she shouted back. Kylo growled in agitation and turned away from her, apparently intent on abandoning her with Sidious in the training room.

Kylo had only made it a few paces before Sidious called after him. “Tell her the truth, Ren, or I will.”

Kylo stopped. She could feel the conflict in him, the desire to run, but whatever loyalty he still felt toward her held his feet in place. When he turned to face her, his eyes were fierce and the energy around him howled tempestuously. Sidious had him cornered, yet he refused to tell her.

“It was an accident! Let it go!”
“If it was an accident… then this person isn’t evil, are they?” she asked, voice wavering. The floor had long ago fallen out from under her and she feared where she would land. With each passing moment, she was both more determined and more terrified to know. He refused to answer, but the strengthening of his barriers over the bond was impossible to ignore. It was all the affirmation she required. “I know them,” she ventured as the realization finally clicked. He began pacing back and forth, trapped like a caged animal. “That’s why you’re protecting them, and you’re afraid what I will think of them when I know.” She waited, no longer able to rely on his emotions over the bond. When he raised his eyes, they were burning with ferocity, but she saw the truth in them. “Was it Luke?”

He shook his head.

“Poe?”

His head dropped to his trembling hands. She knew the answer before he spoke again. “No.”

Poe had never been to Jakku before Tuanul, he had no opportunity to hurt her parents. Rose had been halfway across the galaxy with her family. The only one of her friends who had any opportunity to commit those crimes with the First Order was the one who had been forced to serve them. Her voice broke as she forced herself to whisper her friend’s name. “Finn?”

“No!” Kylo shouted, gripping his head tightly, his nails digging into his scalp, as his control spiraled.

“Was it your father?” she pushed, knowing he was close to the edge and she was close to her answer. “Is that who’s worth protecting? Is that why you killed–”

“No, it was you!”

Kylo inhaled sharply as the awareness of what he had said broke through the storm of his emotions. His wide-eyed stare immediately met hers. There was an honesty there that she would have actively fought to deny if his words hadn’t rung true in her heart. When that realization crashed through her, she felt the closest experience to death while one’s heart continues to beat. It was as if the old Rey died, her soul ripped from her body with those four damning words, and the shell of who she once believed she had been was left in its place.

A sob tore from her throat.
The room was silent except for Sidious’ low cackle behind her. “Yes…”

Her bondmate turned toward Sidious and raised his hand, directing his fury into the Force wrapping around the creature’s throat. His hand was clenched, his teeth were bared, and his eyes were wild with bloodlust. Rey hadn’t realized he was screaming until he was silenced with an arc of blue energy that Sidious had deflected off the floor with a twitch of his fingers. Kylo flew backward, landing with a harsh thud, but Rey couldn’t find it in herself to be concerned. She couldn’t find it in herself to feel anything. Her only reality was his words echoing endlessly in her head.

*It was you!*

As the creature moved forward to punish Kylo with another steady current of lightning, the dark energy that had been wrapped around her released her from its imprisonment, abandoning her like everything else she believed to be true. Without the strength of its hold, she collapsed to the floor. It was enough to distract Sidious from further torture. He turned to her, grinning victoriously. Kylo pushed himself up, but his attention was not directed at the danger. His stare met hers instead. Glancing up into her bondmate’s mercurial eyes, she found the betrayal, the broken trust, the pain, the anger, and fear she knew would be there, but she also found empathy. It all made sense; why he understood her, why he wanted her to join him, why he continued to assert that she didn’t belong with the Resistance, why he feared her darkness. He knew what she had done, and he empathized, because he killed his parents, too.

*It was you!*

Kylo had known when they touched hands and in the elevator on the *Supremacy*. He had known on Crait. He had known on Kamino, after Concordia, when he shut out their bond, the night she almost killed him, the night his mother died, in their shared dreams, on Mustafar, in the refresher, when he braided her hair, and when he taught her about the Force. Every significant moment between them, Kylo had been keeping a terrible secret. He had held her and lied. He had looked into her eyes—the eyes of a girl who killed her parents—and told her she was good.

After living her entire life in denial, she couldn’t find any of it to grasp onto. She felt nothing but honesty in his words. Her eyes trailed down to the floor, the world around her moving in and out of focus. Closing her eyes, she searched her memories for that fateful moment when her family flew away on that ship. She tried to remember what happened before… what happened after, but all she had was that short snippet from the vision. How had she forgotten it for all that time before
Takodana? Why couldn’t she remember how they had died? Her fingers trembled, and she braced herself against the floor. As her entire world upended, she was surrounded by liars and deceivers. She had never felt so alone.

Rey started when a dark shadow blocked the light overhead, and she looked up to her bondmate standing over her. She watched with detachment as he lowered himself to kneel before her, his body trembling from both the lightning and his emotions. There was still anger and accusation in his eyes as he studied hers. He didn’t say anything, which was likely for the best, but he was there with her when he didn’t have to be. He could have turned his back on her and left her reeling alone with a monster. In her daze, she recognized he wanted to, but she couldn’t bring herself to care or wonder why he stayed. She lifted her hand to his temple. “Let me see them,” she whispered. “Please.”

Rey had whispered the same plea to a cave of mirrors on a faraway planet once. The Force hadn’t shown her what she had sought then. It had brought her to Kylo instead, and shown him the answer. Now she repeated her plea to the man who held the secret. The Force may have denied her, but he wouldn’t, not this time. Kylo refused to look at her, but he didn’t fight her. He closed his eyes with a slow exhale, surrendering to her will.

“No!” Rey screamed, “Come back!” Unkar Plutt gripped her arm roughly, silencing her as the ship flew away. They were leaving her. The fear, despair, and betrayal were building uncontrollably inside her, coalescing into something she had never felt before. “No!” The agony was giving way to fury, staining her vision red. They were leaving her! Her hands reached out toward the ship as she begged them as she had every night for months when they left her alone in the darkness while they drank. Only this time, they were leaving for good. She felt their energies fading as they left her, and that realization, along with the emotions building up inside her, overwhelmed her until something snapped.

The powerful wave that crashed through her exploded out of her hand, and she and Plutt were thrown backward. It was the sound that brought her attention back to the sky. A deafening blast cast a blinding, white light against the cloudless, blue atmosphere. When the bright light faded, it revealed the ship had been ripped apart as if it were glass crushed in her fist. The silence that followed was deafening as the pieces of debris from the ship fell from the sky. She was young, naïve, but she knew enough to realize that something terrible had happened, and it was all her fault. She collapsed under the weight of what she had done, screaming for her parents, but Plutt pulled her to her feet and dragged her away.

The memory skipped forward, and Rey found herself curled in a corner, hands over her ears, as the objects levitated around her. Broken from days of sorrow, she was desperate for sleep so she could see the boy in her dreams, the boy who could give her hope again. The harder she fought for sleep, the further away from him she felt. The explosion replayed over and over in her head, reminding her that she was alone. “Please, make it go away,” she begged that voice deep inside her. “I don’t want to be sad anymore. Please… just make everything go away. Make it a bad dream. They’re not dead, they’re safe. They made a mistake. They flew away. But they’ll come back.
for me someday." She said it over and over as she convinced herself, curling into a ball as she waited for sleep to take her.

His voice jolted her from the vision. “You didn’t know what you were doing, but you used Force persuasion on your own mind. By pure will you forced yourself to forget the explosion, your parents, your powers, me—you forgot everything except the weak explanation that your parents would come back for you. It was too painful for you to remember, so you forced yourself to forget. You kept those powers dormant until they were awoken when you touched that lightsaber. When I searched through your mind, it restored whatever connection we had, and when you pushed back, it made it stronger.”

Rey felt the truth of his statement in the furthest depths of her soul. Not only had Kylo kept the secret that she had killed her own parents and forgotten them, but that she had forgotten him. There were two very different, but equally suffocating, types of grief that she endured simultaneously; she was plagued by the role she played in her parents’ death, of course, but also the revelation that she had destroyed her early connection with Kylo. She couldn’t help but wonder: if she hadn’t forgotten him, left him to face the galaxy alone, would he have fallen? Or would she have been able to save him? Was everything that tormented her—from her loneliness, to his fall, to the suffering of the galaxy—fundamentally her fault? Was she the monster? “I don't understand,” she said, her voice breaking under the burden she now carried, “why did you keep this from me? Why wouldn't you use this in the throne room, convince me I'm evil to join you?”

“It wasn’t my story to tell!” he shouted dismissively. There an odd conflict playing across his face. Certainly, he fervently believed his words, but there was something else, too…shame. He refused to raise his stare to Sidious, and it finally clicked. There was still a part of him loyal to the darkness, and that part felt shame for not using that knowledge to turn her. Even back then, he had made a choice against the darkness in which he was so deeply entrenched. It made no sense, so she waited patiently for him to elaborate on why he had kept it from her; he owed her that. In typical Kylo fashion, he withdrew in upon himself. In his agitation, his barriers fell, and she heard every projected word in his head.

I couldn’t do it, not after I knew what killing my father did to me. Even killing Snoke… Sidious tormented me. I saw what the cave did to you; how could I be the one to tell you that? It would break you, and they didn’t deserve your tears. They were nothing: I wanted you to let them go, to be by my side. And all you wanted to know was who they were. I promised myself from the second I saw it that I would only tell you what you needed to know – that they were nobody, they abandoned you, and they are dead, because that's all that matters. I thought if you knew your parents were nothing to this war, that you weren’t required by bloodline to become some great Jedi Master, that you had no destiny that had been decided for you, then that would be enough… then I would be enough. You didn't need to know the rest. I was afraid of what it would do to you again. The pain of losing them took you away from me once; what if you chose to forget it all again? But, even in my fear, I gave you a choice to remember in the throne room. I told you that you knew the truth, that you had hidden it away. You chose what you wanted to remember.
“What I wanted to remember? Or what was convenient for you?” The retort wasn’t nearly as impactful as she wanted it to be as her voice wavered with emotion. He winced, understanding that she had heard him, but otherwise didn’t answer. The tears that she had successfully kept at bay finally fell under the weight of what he had done—what she had done.

_I killed my parents._

She should have left, walked away, and shut him out. Not because she hated him, or because he took so long to tell her the truth, but because she was a monster who killed her parents. She had long feared his darkness, but he should have feared hers. She almost killed him more than once because of it. Maybe, without her, he could have already saved himself. He had thought it was best to shut out her darkness before; maybe he was right. She should have walked away, but, unlike in the throne room, this time she was aware of the consequences of her running away. Not only would it deepen the betrayal he felt, but she would be leaving him with the king of monsters.

She couldn’t leave him, not with Sidious. Even if she could walk away, he would never understand what his deception had done to her. If she stayed, then she would make him understand. He could hurt her in her vulnerability—she knew that—but she had to try. Rey hiccupped through a sob.

“That wasn't your decision to make, Ben.”

“Perhaps not,” he said, staring down at his hand as he rapped his knuckles on the floor distractedly, “but I would do it again.” It wasn’t what she had been hoping for, but it was honest.

“You lied to her,” Sidious prompted from somewhere behind her bondmate, “How can she trust you? You would do it again, and yet, what was it your mother told you, Kylo Ren? ‘Never lie to the ones you –’”

“Stop!” Kylo clenched his fists to prevent himself from reacting violently to his former master again. The dark raven strands on his bowed head shook as he continued to stare at his hands. Rey didn’t pity him; it was his fault they were there. And Sidious was right: how could she trust him when he had lied to her? Kylo sucked in a breath and finally dragged his stare back to hers. “I didn't tell you the whole truth,” he said, working his jaw, “but I _didn’t_ lie to you.”

_Why can’t you see what you’ve done!?_

“Oh?” she asked flippantly, drying her tears. “Not like you did on Mustafar when you lied and told me you’d be safe?”
“Nothing I said was false!” he insisted. Though it would have been a welcome distraction, she didn’t argue with him, because she didn’t trust her voice… or him. She settled for a withering glare instead. She watched the sorrow and remorse flicker across his face. “I didn’t do it to hurt you, Rey; I did it to protect you.”

“And I kept the truth about Snoke…Sidious… that creature from you to protect you,” she said bitterly, vacillating between anger and despair. She didn’t know how Kylo had existed so long with the conflict inside him; it was exhausting to feel this war of emotions.

Kylo’s struggle with his own emotions mirrored hers: unstable, turbulent, and fluctuating. His sorrow dwindled as her words fell into the growing chasm between them, and the resentment he held for her rose from the ashes. “That’s different! He’s a threat. He could have used you to kill me, or worse, turned you.” Everything they had built on secrets and lies was crumbling down around them, but Rey didn’t have it in her to try to stop it anymore. She felt the darkness but didn’t have the strength to push it away. There was no point in trying to understand him; she only sought a retort that could hurt him as deeply as he’d hurt her.

“Well, I bet your mother said she was ‘only trying to protect you’ when she didn’t tell you about your grandfather!”

“It was her place to tell me!” The fire returned to his eyes as he pushed himself off the ground and stood. “She compared me, feared me, hated me for resembling a man I didn’t know! I am nothing like her!” He was seething in a rage that burned from a wound far deeper and far older than their fight. “And you…I thought you were different. I was wrong.” Kylo turned to leave, and, this time, she believed he would. Nothing was keeping him there, least of all his loyalty to her. He shook his head as he walked away. This time Sidious let him go; enough damage had been done. He had achieved his goal to drive them apart, after all. That realization was enough to pierce through her darkness, which allowed another sobering realization in; if he left, she would likely never see him again. Though the physical distance between them grew by the second, she heard his projected thoughts loud and clear.

**Why can’t you see this wasn’t my place? I didn’t ask for this knowledge; I don’t know why the Force burdened me with that vision. It haunted me to keep something like this, especially from you, but it would kill me to be the one to tell you. And, hell, why would you believe me if I told you? You didn’t remember! I had no proof! All I knew was the moment I saw your face after the vision, I decided Snoke had to die, because I realized that even if turning you gave me everything I wanted, I was loyal enough to you not to tell you. My mother warned me to never lie, but she was wrong. I could have used that knowledge to destroy you. You made your choice, I only respected it. If you didn’t want to remember, then I would let you forget.**
Is that what I should do for you, Ben? Let you forget me, like you’ve forgotten everyone else who loved you? Let you go back to your master and never see you again until the day I’m forced to kill you? Because that’s not love. Though, she decided, neither was watching him walk away. Rey wished he had said those words aloud to her, but it was progress, and that was enough. Kylo had hurt her, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t worth fighting for. He was trying, she knew that—she could hear it in the agony of his words.

It was almost enough to ease the pressure growing in her chest. He had made a decision and stood by it. It was a wrong one, but he was right; it wasn't with the intent to hurt her, just as she hadn’t intended to hurt him.

“Ben?” she called after him, laying her heart open for him on the floor of that training room. She had given him every reason to break it, but this was their last hope. She nearly sobbed in relief when he stopped. He lowered his head for a moment, at war with himself, before he turned to face her. His eyebrows were raised expectantly, he chewed his lip with an air of impatience, but she knew he felt just as vulnerable as she did. “Do you hate me?”

Kylo released a slow exhale of the breath he had evidently been holding. “I feel a lot of things right now,” he said softly. “But, no, not hate.” She risked a small grin as he closed the distance between them. “I could never hate you, Rey.”

“Pathetic,” Sidious sneered from where he had watched the exchange. “Your weakness for her blinds you—”

Kylo turned from where he stood to glare at the creature, pointing at the creature threateningly. “Don’t make me kill you again!”

“You were projecting your thoughts, before,” she murmured, grasping Kylo’s arm to redirect his attention. They both knew Sidious’s games all too well, and Kylo had wasted enough of his life on his former master. “You said you were loyal to me. Are you still?”

He nodded, swallowing thickly. “Do you... Do you hate me?”

“I love you,” she assured him, but his rigid posture didn’t lose any of its tension. She searched his eyes for what he was bracing himself for, but his stare fell to their feet.

“But...” he prompted, his voice small and uncertain. It was only then that she understood. He was
waiting for the words that came next, that had always come next after that exclamation. The condition. He was waiting for why he wasn’t good enough. Despite how disillusioned she was with him, it was heartbreaking.

“Look at me, Ben.” She waited patiently, watching the muscle on his jaw tick before his dark, stormy eyes finally met hers. “There is no ‘but.’ I love you, that’s it. If there is a ‘but,’ then it is this; I’m angry and hurt and disappointed in you, but I love you.”

“Disappointed?” He rolled the word in his mouth as if it tasted as bitter as it sounded.

“Yes, I’m disappointed!” Realizing that shouting wouldn’t help the situation, she closed her eyes and centered herself in the Force. When she spoke again, she had calmed the agitation in her voice. “How can I trust you to tell me the truth, even if it’s hard? You were different; you always told me the truth.”

“I did tell you the truth.”

Sidious tutted as he circled closer. “So forgiving, yet so naïve. That is your weakness, child. Ask him what other secrets he has withheld from you…about the Resistance.”

Her stomach dropped in dread. She would ask him; she would ask him to tell the truth about everything. But not here, not now. She would not allow this monster to drive them apart. “No,” she said, resolute.

“Fine,” the creature sneered. He turned to his former apprentice. His eyes flared with darkness. “Kylo Ren, ask her where she is.”

Kylo shook his head. “I would never ask her to tell me.” They were angry, but they had built an alliance against the creature attempting to tear them apart. There was nothing worse Sidious could expose than what he had already forced them to reveal. Her past and the whispers in his head were their greatest struggles. If those secrets couldn’t break them, nothing could. Rey breathed a sigh of relief.

“No?” There was something that sparked in the creature’s eyes that terrified her. “Ah, that’s right, you believe you already know where she is. But she’s not where you think, my young apprentice.” Kylo stepped forward to challenge his former master, but the words were lost to a sudden blaring sound reverberating through the training room. An alarm, she realized. It sounded uncannily like
the alarm for the faulty thermal sensor in the Engineering Bay of the *Millennium Falcon*.

*It is the alarm for the thermal sensor.*

"That's a ship alarm," Kylo whispered, pivoting on his heels to face her. His eyes were wide in a fear she barely recognized in him. “An *in-flight* ship alarm. You’re not docked at a base." He said it in a tone that suggested it wasn’t a question. He was staring over her shoulder at the room, attempting to mentally force his way onto her side of the bond to view her surroundings.

“I thought you knew; you said you knew we left Barkhesh,” she reminded him. Her tone maintained an angry façade, but fear was churning underneath. There was nothing worse Sidious could reveal, but Kylo’s terror was disconcerting. “You were *inside* the ‘fresher, you were touching boxes in the storage room when you braided –”

“How would I know? You’ve been closing off your side of the bond so I couldn’t see your surroundings! Your barriers slipped once or twice, but not enough for me to discern anything helpful like the fact you are *not* with the Resistance! I thought you were staying on a ship at the new base,” he snapped, tilting his head to pin her under his formidable stare. “I thought you were safe, not flying across the galaxy…”

“Why would she trust you, Ren?” Sidious prodded. “Why would she listen to you when she could listen to her general? *He* is with her right now on her mission, waiting for her to warm his bed.”

Rey could feel the heat of his anger over the bond, but when he turned to her, his voice was deceptively calm. “You willingly left the safety of the base… with him?” He was trying to carry on their pretense – to prove Sidious wrong – but eventually, his anger would win over. What would be the breaking point? Would Sidious never stop until he had torn them apart?

Kylo believed Sidious’s lies, but why wouldn’t he? There had been truth in everything the creature had forced them to reveal. And with the darkness those revelations empowered, it was difficult to sort through the doubt and anger and fear to the truth. Sidious was achieving exactly what he wanted. That didn’t stop her from trying to prevent the inevitable. “No,” she said, “I told him I needed a new Kyber crystal for my lightsaber and he told me where to go. I needed to get away from the Resistance. I told you – I am nothing more to Poe than a means to turn you. He was only here to test my loyalty.”

“He’s testing her loyalty all right,” the creature interjected. Rey bit her lip to control her anger. There was no sense in wasting her energy in using the Force against Sidious. This was all *his* manipulation; he wasn’t truly there.
"Rey?" Kylo’s increasingly panicked tone prompted her own unease. His gaze bounced back and forth as he searched her eyes. She held his stare. Whatever he was looking for, she was resolved to help him find the truth. When he spoke again, however, the panic hadn’t faded. “I don’t care about Dameron. If you choose to give yourself to him, then so be it. But where are you going?"

"I just told you… I couldn’t stay with the Resistance, so I went to find a crystal for my lightsaber. You know the other one is too broken," she answered. It was the truth. She couldn’t stay because of her distrust and disagreement with everything Poe stood for. She couldn’t stay because of the danger their bond posed to the others. She couldn’t stay because of the danger they posed to him. She needed to find her Kyber crystal, so she was prepared for the war that was looming ever closer.

You need to let this go, Ben.

The room was quiet for a moment, but Kylo was not silent. Words and thoughts crashed erratically through her consciousness as he searched for a solution in his head. It was clear he had no intention of accepting her deflection without a fight. What terrified her was the length he would go to find out. He had nearly burned the entire galaxy down in search of the map to Luke. What would he do to find her? What had he already done? What would Sidious convince him to do? That was the most terrifying thought of all. She had to convince Kylo to let this go before it drove them apart. Kylo, however, was blind to the consequences in his agitation. “I don’t care about the Resistance, Rey. Where are you going? Just... tell me where you are going. Please...that’s all I’m asking for... where are you going? I'll protect you." He was desperate, his tone bouncing from calm to fervent and back. She could hear the panic in his voice; he was losing control.

Rey knew she couldn’t tell him, not when she didn’t know what he would do. The only truth she was certain of was that her friends’ lives would be at risk if their location fell into his hands. Kylo may never willingly hurt the people she loved, but as she had seen on Mustafar, as long as he allowed the darkness inside, he was a threat to them. He couldn’t protect her or her friends from himself. As long as they were on opposite sides of the war, he couldn’t know the location of the base or her destination. When Sidious wasn’t manipulating him, Rey believed Kylo would understand that.

Rey channeled the calm she wished to portray. They had already been on rocky ground with the numerous lies and secrets that had been unearthed. They were both angry, and this latest development would only add fuel to the fire. If she didn’t deescalate the situation, she feared the consequences. He had been so close to turning, she was certain of that truth. They couldn’t afford another backstep, not with whatever Poe had planned for her after Ilum. “Let’s not discuss this now, in front of him.”
“No, lets,” Kylo replied flippantly. “Where did Dameron send you?”

“Ben, please.” Her voice faltered with the entreaty even as she fought to steady it. She felt as hopeless as she had in the throne room. She could feel the darkness overwhelming him, she could sense his desperation, she could see the unwillingness to listen in his eyes. “Please don’t do this now.”

“Don’t hold back on my account,” Sidious said, drifting around behind Kylo. His hungry eyes wandered over her bondmate for a moment before his cruel stare found her again. “I’m already inside your mind, young Jedi, I know where you’re going. If you love him as you say, then why wouldn’t you tell him?”

Why are you doing this? What do you want from me? If you’re in our minds, then why not take control again and force us to kill each other? Why do this? What do you want?

As Kylo waited for her response, and the smile widened on the creature’s twisted face, Rey’s heart rate began to surge. What did Sidious want? He had spoken as if he wanted Kylo at his side, but the monster had tried to convince her to kill him. Sidious hated the Skywalkers. It made far more sense that he wanted Kylo to suffer, that he wanted him dead. What if she was wrong, what if it wasn’t Sidious’s intention to convince Kylo to destroy the Resistance? What if Sidious forced her to tell him the location, compelling her to warn the others? If Poe knew Kylo would be anywhere near Ilum, it could be disastrous. Kylo couldn’t know where she was going, especially if Sidious wanted him there. “Ben, I’m not doing this with you right now,” she whispered.

“Damn it, Rey, it’s not safe out there!” His eyes pleaded with her, his whole body was shaking feverishly. Does he actually care? Did he expect her to believe they had faced the Praetorian Guard and Maul together, she had scarred the Supreme Leader of the most powerful army in the galaxy, but the thought of her alone in open space terrified him?

Any chance Rey had to explain, to rationalize with him, was interrupted by his manipulative former master. “Where should she go, Ren, when it is your army looking for her? You can’t protect her from them. But I can still protect her... if you join me.” She was wrong; Sidious didn’t care about inciting another confrontation between Kylo and the Resistance. He didn’t want him by his side either. He wanted Kylo to truly suffer. Nothing would be worse than making Kylo his prisoner in darkness again.

Kylo’s stare slowly dropped to the floor. It wasn’t his sudden silence that concerned her as much as the barriers he tightened in the bond. “Ben?” It hadn’t occurred to her that he would ever consider the monster’s proposition. Kylo knew he couldn’t trust Sidious, didn’t he? He wouldn’t join the monster if she didn’t tell him where she was going, would he? What he would do in desperation concerned her, but she had to believe he wouldn’t. Ben Solo was stronger than that.
When Kylo raised his eyes, he shifted to glance over his shoulder at Sidious. The creature nodded with a conspiratorial glint in his eyes. Kylo released a slow breath before turning back to meet her gaze. There was conflict there, but she was encouraged when he stepped forward. “Go back, please,” he begged. “I’ll find you a thousand Kyber crystals. No mission is worth this.”

Sidious shifted behind Kylo, resting his gnarled hand on his former apprentice’s shoulder to prevent him from moving forward any farther. Kylo flinched, but didn’t pull away. She wondered if he could. “I can’t go back, Ben,” she reasoned. “I can’t stand by what Poe has done, and as long as I have a Force bond with the Supreme Leader of the First Order, I can’t risk another disaster like the war room.”

“So you’re risking your life because of me?” he growled. Sidious’s smile widened; his glare was challenging. He would not give up Ben Solo without a fight. Her bondmate would never be safe as long as that creature could find him. How could they kill something that was already dead? How could she tear Kylo away from that monster long enough for him to see the truth? Rey knew Sidious wouldn’t stop until he tore them apart, and Kylo was too focused on where she was going to realize it. “You’re putting yourself in danger,” Kylo grit out, “because of our connection?”

Those three life-altering words from earlier replayed in her mind. It was you!

Rey knew she wasn’t in danger. They had left Barkhesh hours after the confrontation in the war room and they spent most of their time in hyperspace. Even with her general onboard, she was safe. Kylo, however, was not safe. Sidious was in his mind again, his general was likely planning a mutiny, the Resistance was planning an ambush and he was bonded to a monster who killed her parents. The darkness shivered through her. “I’m not the one in danger because of our connection, Ben, you are.” Kylo shook his head, stepping forward and away from the monster’s grasp. The farther he stepped away from his former master, the better. "Don't worry about me,” she assured him. “I'm safe.”

Evidently, that was the wrong thing to say. Kylo’s shout echoed through the training room. "You’re not safe!"

Kylo was vacillating between deceptively calm and sarcastic then back to irrationally angry and pleading. They all knew that Kylo was losing his limited grasp on his control. Rey didn’t need the bond to know he was spiraling; fear was howling in the Force around them. Judging by the creature’s behavior behind her bondmate, it was exactly what he wanted. “Do you truly fear her being found? Or do you fear her escaping you again?” Sidious prompted.
“Ben?”

Kylo’s clenched his fists to control his growing agitation, but his focus remained on her. “Stay with the Resistance!” he pleaded. “Out there is not safe! Dantooine is safe! I promise I will protect you and your friends; the First Order will not touch you!”

A cold chill ran down her spine as Sidious smiled triumphantly. Rey had felt this sensation once when a steelpecker collided with her speeder. Blind-sided. This was what it felt to be blind-sided.

"Ben...”

Her voice trembled as the realization sank deep in her stomach, “I never told you where the new base was.” He couldn't have discovered it over the bond. It was impossible. She had purposefully never stepped foot on the base. Finding out about Barkhesh through the bond was one thing, but this meant he had been actively tracking her friends. To what end was her greatest fear. Struggling to breathe in disbelief, she gathered the strength to face the truth. Kylo was pacing the floor, running his hands through his hair. He wouldn't look at her. Betrayal sank its teeth in deep, building upon the distrust already festering between them.

Rey grasped onto the Force to steady her breathing. “How did you know?”

“What does it matter?” Kylo muttered. He had stopped pacing, but his body was vibrating with a dangerous cocktail of emotions. Rey could see the wrath and destruction that could be wrought upon them vibrating just below the surface. Nothing would be gained by continuing to press him, but this wasn’t the same as the revelations exposed so far. This wasn’t a deception that would heal with time, this was directly endangering people she loved. If he didn’t want to let this go, then neither would she.

“Tell her your plans, Kylo Ren,” Sidious said, his conniving tone broken by the same smile that had been plastered on his face since the alarm had sounded. “Tell her your plans to take her prisoner and destroy the Resistance.”

As Sidious circled behind her, Kylo stepped closer. She turned to the creature, but she knew she wouldn’t find the truth there. The darkness was twisting her thoughts as much as Sidious had. What was the truth? She couldn’t believe her bondmate anymore. Had her desire to save him blinded her to who he was? Had the progress she’d seen in him been a lie? Was it all a lie? She didn’t know who to trust. She felt claustrophobic. She needed space to think, to grasp the concept
that Kylo was not the man she believed him to be. There was no logical conclusion for his deceit other than something nefarious. If she wasn’t with the Resistance, his only reason to track them was if he did have a plan; a plan that likely involved the death of her friends. Her bondmate seemed to sense the path her thoughts had taken. “He’s lying,” he said. “I won’t do anything to them, Rey.” It was disturbing how sincere he sounded.

As he reached out, Rey took a step back. “Then why are you tracking them, Ben?”

Sidious was close enough that she felt the warmth of his breath on her ear when he spoke again. “Why should you trust him after he told you that he wouldn’t attack Barkhesh?”

“No!” Kylo snapped, concentrating on his former master. He surged forward and she thought he would make another foolish attempt to confront Sidious, but he stepped between Rey and his former master instead. Standing tall and imposing, Kylo’s tone was murderous as he faced the creature he had once served. “Stay away from her.”

The monster cackled as he stepped away and continued to circle. Kylo turned his back to the creature and returned his focus to her. He grasped her arms and dipped his head to search her heartbroken glare. “You never want to speak to me again?” he asked, voice softer than when he had spoken to Sidious. “Fine. If you can’t go back? Fine. But tell me where you’re going, so I can protect you.”

All she could manage was a slight shake of her head. His hands were warm and steadying. It hurt that she wanted more than anything to step forward into his arms, to find comfort in his embrace from the ache of betrayal, but she knew she couldn’t, because he had been the one to betray her. Another wave of tears broke free in hot paths down her cheeks. She watched his face harden as he read the emotions in her eyes. Kylo released her from his grasp with an impassioned shout.

“They arrived safely! That should prove you can trust me!”

It was easy to be deceived by his logic, it always had been, but she knew the validity of his statement didn’t matter. “You should have told me,” she said brokenly. The pain in her chest made it difficult to breathe as she fought back a sob. “Then I could have chosen for myself whether or not to trust you. Trust is a choice, not something you force upon someone.”

The darkness was suffocating as it descended upon them all like a heavy blanket. She couldn’t bear to meet her bondmate’s tempestuous gaze. Blinking away tears, her eyes followed the movement of the creature that had manipulated them both to that very moment. She swiped at her tears so he wouldn’t have the satisfaction of watching them fall.
Rey gasped in air as she felt the weight of both of their emotions clashing together like lightsabers in the Force. She wished he had controlled Kylo as he had on Mustafar instead. It would have been easier if they were fighting with weapons instead of words. It had hurt less when Kylo was trying to kill her. Physical pain was familiar. It was simple. It would have been a welcome distraction instead of facing the man she thought she knew. Wounds would heal, but this…

She hadn’t realized that Kylo had stepped closer until he spoke again, “Haven’t I done enough to prove you can trust me?”

Rey refused to look up at him as she shook her head. “No,” she whispered. “I don’t know what to trust right now. You lied to me.”

“I didn’t –”

“You deceived me!” she shouted, shoving him away from her.

“Then so did you!” he shouted back.

Kylo clenched his eyes shut and exhaled slowly as he increased the distance between them. His clenched fists were shaking; his nails were embedded in his skin, blood dripped through his fingers as he tried to maintain a semblance of control. The darkness pulsed and heaved with his rage. “Does their fate not matter to you then?” he replied sharply. Her own anger flared, but he continued, “We both know if I did come for them, the only reason I wouldn’t order a strike is you. If you honestly believe I would send my army after them, why would you leave?”

“Tell her, Ren,” Sidious said from behind them. “Tell her how you knew about their base.”

Kylo ignored him in favor of waiting for Rey to respond to his questions, but she stood silent, arms crossed in accusation.

“We’re doing this again?” Kylo scoffed. His anger bled into his voice, penetrating deeper with every word. “This right here is why I didn’t tell you, Rey! You were indignant over Barkhesh, so I knew how you would react over this! All that matters is I know they arrived safely at the base, and you were supposed to be with them.”
“It was him,” Sidious continued. “He convinced the others to flee to the base, ensnaring them in his perfectly laid trap. You unwittingly delivered your friends to him with a bow and left them alone against his army.”

She shook her head, tears clouding her vision, as the darkness deepened its hold. How could she have been so foolish? She hadn’t listened to the others and now they were all in danger. “Why Ben? Why would you trick them into going to Dantooine?”

His attention shifted away from her. She could feel his remorse, his restraint, but she could also hear the agitation in his voice. “I didn’t trick them.”

She wiped the tears from her cheeks, huffing mirthlessly. “That’s a lie! We both know they would never trust you!”

“Believe what you want to believe, Rey, I don’t care,” he said, tone as cutting as a blade. “But that doesn’t change the fact that they’re safe right now and you’re not. Don’t listen to the darkness. If my main concern was destroying your friends, I wouldn't be fighting for you to stay on that world. If you don’t trust me, fine, then go back to them to protect them.”

Rey was fiercely angry with him for the secrets he had kept, but she had understood his logic for keeping the truth about her parents from her, as misguided as it had been. But this… there was no rational answer she could find for why he convinced her friends to go to that base or why he was demanding to know her location – information that could endanger them both. “Why are you doing this!”

Kylo’s glare drifted to hers. His response was as sarcastic as it was biting. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“I guess it is,” she whispered as another wave of tears blurred her vision. Her heart still wanted to believe that she was wrong, that this wasn’t real, that they would wake up from this nightmare and he would be the man she had fallen deeply in love with over the past few weeks. It was the denial, she knew that, but it didn’t make it any easier to accept.

Sidious stopped circling as the darkness thundered around them. Distantly, Rey knew she was falling into his trap as much as her bondmate was, but the foundation of their bond was crumbling underneath them and she was trying desperately to reach solid ground. Nothing made sense anymore. Everything changed the second she realized her friends were in danger. She thought the revelation of their darkest secrets was as far as they could fall, but she had been wrong. “For someone who promised to be ‘honest from the beginning,’ you sure didn’t mind keeping secrets from me, Ben.”
Kylo growled in agitation. “I told you… I was trying to protect you!”

“Protect me?” she laughed bitterly. From what? The First Order? They hadn’t been the ones to reveal the temple. They hadn’t been the ones to trick her friends into hiding on Dantooine. It was absurd that he believed he was protecting her as he commanded his army to obliterate the Resistance. “There is nothing you can do to protect me,” she said, the laughter was gone from her voice, “as long as you’re with the First Order.”

“Fine. Done. I’ll leave,” he said, the words thrown from his lips frivolously, as if they hadn’t been the words she had been longing to hear since they’d been connected.

“It’s another ploy,” Sidious reminded her, “another lie, to get what he wants.”

Sidious was right, Kylo wouldn’t just leave. It hurt. She refused to look at him. She wished she could forget him again as she had before. It would be easier than realizing that the man she loved truly was her enemy. It would be easier than admitting he was using her to get to her friends—that was the only reason he would be so obsessed with discovering her location. Letting go of the hope she’d had in him was the worst part.

“Rey, look at me,” he demanded. “Have I ever lied to you?”

No, but you kept very important secrets.

His eyes looked earnest, but she knew the truth. Rey turned away from him as she searched for an escape, refusing to be manipulated by his deceiving eyes. She wrapped her arms around herself as she suppressed a sob. “I think you would right now….”

Kylo paced behind her; she could hear his terrified breaths and the soft thud of his boots as he moved. “Where are you going?” he demanded, as if he had the right to demand anything from her. His voice was trembling in agitation and she feared his reaction to her next answer. His unpredictability concerned her most.

Her voice was soft, but unyielding when she forced herself to admit the truth. “I can’t tell you.”
His emotions surged in a hurricane around her in response. She could feel his fight for control in the Force, but his words still exploded in the training room like blasterfire. "Then you will go to your death!"

“Then it will be you who caused it…” What had begun as a shout had deteriorated into a sob. She couldn’t decide whether she was more furious at him for breaking her trust or herself for trusting him in the first place. Her words filled the growing chasm between them, she felt his desperation crash through the Force as the silence stretched. He was searching for an impossible solution; there was nothing that would convince her to tell him.

“I told you, she will never trust you, Ren,” Sidious said, shattering the silence. “You will never protect her on your own, but you can still protect her by my side.”

Kylo’s body heaved as if the words had physically knocked the wind out of him. His breath was shaky as his attention was drawn back to his former master again. The monster’s promises had not been successful yet, but she knew Kylo was considering them. If her bondmate chose to listen, there would be nothing she could do to stop him, because she couldn’t give him what he wanted. Kylo would make the choices he wanted to make, but she wouldn’t give him the location of her friends. And the second she was free of this nightmare, she would warn the Resistance on Dantooine.

Kylo’s shoulders slumped. His eyes were glossy. His breath came unevenly but with a volatile, capricious element that reminded her of a wounded animal. When his eyes found hers, they were dark and hopeless. When he spoke, it felt like a final plea. "Go back to where it is safe or tell me where you’re going. Please.”

His eyes…it was the same look, same word, same desperate begging from the throne room. She turned away, she had to hold the high ground. “I need to focus on this mission, I don’t even know if I deserve to be a Jedi. But I need to know, and finding this crystal is important to me. I have to prove to myself I’m not just a monster who killed my parents.”

Kylo was nodding, but she knew he wasn’t listening. He was quiet, but she could feel his desperation; he wouldn’t stop until he found them. “Fine, don’t tell me where you’re going,” he said with resignation. For one fleeting moment, Rey believed that they had overcome Sidious’s manipulations. Then he continued, “but give me the transponder codes for your ship. I assured the Resistance arrived on Dantooine without interference from the Order, I can do the same for you.”

Rey was set on asking him how exactly he had assured the safety of the Resistance from his army when Sidious spoke again, his tone light with levity. “But you already know the transponder codes for her ship, Ren.”
“If I knew them, then I wouldn’t be begging her for them right now!” he shouted. Kylo was unraveling. His pacing was erratic and frenzied, the fear in his eyes was wild and frantic. She could just hear his panicked breathing above the hammering of her own heart in her ears. Sidious would give his former apprentice exactly what he so desperately wanted. That information would leave Rey and her friends in danger. That wasn’t the most terrifying part. That creature gave nothing for free. If he gave Kylo that information, what would he want in exchange?

“Your ignorance is astounding, Ren. There is only one ship that you know the transponder codes by heart. What ship, indeed, hmm? If you want to save her life, you know why you must join me,” Sidious coaxed. “You know the one ship you could not hide in this galaxy. You know the truth.”

Rey watched Kylo’s stare go distant. When he finally turned to search her eyes, the desperation was gone. She watched the realization settle with hopeless resignation on his face. “Rey,” he rasped, “why have you been hiding your side of the bond?” It was a plea, but she had the distinct feeling that he was begging for a lie. They both knew he knew the answer. As he shifted to glance back at his former master, Rey felt like she was missing a key piece to the puzzle that sealed their fates. Her mind was jumbled with darkness, she was still reeling from learning the secret that destroyed every preconceived notion of who she was, but her confusion was unrelated to her jumbled thoughts. She couldn’t make sense of why he was considering the creature’s offer.

She hadn’t been the only one to take precautions. They were trapped in this nightmare because Kylo had blocked her out of the bond. And Rey hadn’t blocked her side of the bond in a malicious attempt to deceive him. After the confrontation with Finn and the war room, blocking her side of the bond was a necessity. She was hopeful that if he couldn’t see her side, then her side couldn’t see him either. She didn’t have a chance to disprove that theory, because the shields had slipped as the connection had changed between them. Then her two best friends had seen him and nothing terrible had happened.

She hadn’t foreseen how it would hurt him, but she could see it now. Every choice had led them here, and it wasn’t Sidious’s fault. He was merely exploiting the choices they had made. When she didn’t answer his question, Kylo settled on something more direct. “What ship does Dameron have you flying across the galaxy?”

Rey couldn’t argue against his assumption. Kylo was right, it had been Poe. Maz had insisted that she not take the Millennium Falcon, but Poe had been equally insistent that they couldn’t spare the larger freighters. Rey hadn’t been concerned. Yes, the First Order was searching for it, but they weren’t planning on traveling outside of hyperspace jumps, their destination was an unpopulated world in the Unknown Regions and the ship had always been wanted by someone swindled by Han Solo. Poe had reasoned that they should take that ship for their mission because it was undetectable. Rey knew it wasn’t a trick because Han had explained the varying transponder codes himself. Kylo should know that.
“That alarm …” he continued, “it’s the faulty thermal sensor, isn’t it? He was too stubborn to replace it. You’re on the Falcon?” He said it with certainty, but with eyes were still pleading to be proven wrong. “Rey? Tell me you’re not on the Falcon.”

Rey needed time. She needed to understand why this was so important to him, why he believed it would necessitate joining a monster. If she knew why, she could convince him there was another way. All that mattered was he didn’t join that creature. She could lie to him, she should, but she wouldn’t. “Ben…”

It wasn’t the denial he was searching for, so to Kylo, that name was admission enough. “Are you… are you insane?” he shouted. “It’s the most wanted ship in the galaxy! How could you stand there and tell me you’re safe knowing that!”

"We’re safer on the Falcon, Ben, you should know that," she reasoned. The second she said those words, however, she knew she was wrong. If she hadn’t felt the truth in the Force, his eyes would have told her everything she needed to know. They looked pained before his stare dropped to the floor. “Why wouldn’t we be safe? The bounties? They would have to find us first!”

“Tell her, my young apprentice,” Sidious coaxed.

Tell me what, Ben.

The man who only seconds before had been pleading now refused to look at her. He shook his head adamantly. He wouldn’t tell her, but she had a likely guess. “Ben?” she asked, the unease evident in her voice despite her best efforts. “They can't track us. The transponder codes…”

Kylo winced at the mention of the codes, staring at his boots. She studied him, knowing his tells—the bob of the apple in his throat, the mild furrow in his brow, the slight quiver of his lip—and she knew what else he had been hiding from her.

It was all beginning to make sense. Rey sucked in a breath as she backed away from them. Sidious wouldn’t allow either of them to escape the truth, however. “Tell her about the transponder codes, Ren.”

Kylo refused to look at his former master. “They have them all,” he said, his voice heavy with emotion.
It was her turn to shake her head in disbelief. “How? It's impossible...” Han had explained it to her. No one could have every code, because only Han Solo and Chewbacca knew them.

“It is impossible,” the monster answered, “for the First Order to have them all… unless someone had given them those codes. Someone who knew that ship very well. Someone Han Solo had trusted with those codes, perhaps?” Rey blinked away tears as she turned to her bondmate. He was motionless and silent. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. She knew he could feel her staring at him in horror, waiting for an answer, even though she didn't need one. The wicked smile on the creature’s face broadened. She knew the truth.

“Answer me, Ben!” she demanded, sucking in breaths through gritted teeth. Kylo’s shoulders slumped as he shook his head, stifling a sob. “Ben!” He exhaled slowly, preparing himself for the consequences of his answer. His chest shuddered with his uneven breath. She didn’t feel any pity for him; he didn’t deserve it for what he had done. This was proof that whatever reason he had for wanting to know their location, it wasn’t to protect them.

“Kylo!” she screamed.

His eyes met hers, wet and remorseful. "They have the codes…because I knew them. And I… willingly gave them all to the First Order."

She shook her head as if it could erase what he had done. She shut her eyes as if he couldn’t see the tears. She clasped her hand over her mouth as if he couldn’t hear the sobs. Never – not in the throne room, not after she discovered the truth about her parents, not even when her parents left her behind had she ever felt so betrayed.

This wasn’t done to protect her.

“Yes, there it is,” Sidious hissed. “Your proof of his plan all along. You can’t trust him. He lied about Barkhesh, Dantooine, and your parents. He has been manipulating you from the very moment he tried to persuade you to give him the location of Luke on Ahch-To. He has been trying to seduce you to the dark side by pretending to be trustworthy, but you know the truth. You know what he is.”

When she opened her eyes, she didn’t see her bondmate. She saw the man her friends had warned her about, the man everyone else had seen – Kylo Ren. There was something like pity or remorse in his eyes. Evidently, it pained him to be the cold, merciless murderer that he was. “Don't look at
me like that,” she choked through sobs.

Rey felt him gather the pain, wrapping it around himself like the comfort of a blanket. “Like what?”

“Like you’re anything but a monster.” She shook uncontrollably, betrayal and fury twisting through her. With her words, her chest seized as if she had been wounded. It took her a moment to sort through her own emotions and realize the phantom pain had come from him. The agony in her heart was evident on his face. It wasn’t fair. He shouldn’t have cared at all, but she reminded herself that he didn’t care – not really. He only cared that his plan had been foiled. Though he looked as if those words had ripped his heart out, she supposed he only looked that way because he had never had one to begin with.

“I’ve never claimed to be anything but a monster, Rey,” he said softly. “But I’m not the one you should fear – that’s your boyfriend.” When he huffed something that sounded uncannily like a sob, she’d had enough.

“You know what? You’re not a monster.” His eyes looked hopeful for a moment, but it only enraged her further. “Monsters are evil; they can’t help but do evil things. But you choose this, you want to be a monster, you pretend because it gives you an excuse. You’re not a monster. You weren’t made this way; you decided to stay, you decided to trick my friends into going to Dantooine on a ship with transponder codes you gave the First Order. Stop pretending that you’re anything but a liar and a hypocrite, Supreme Leader. You talk about betrayal, but you betray me every second you stay there with them.”

He shrugged. “No worse than you betray me with Dameron.” It was petty and invidious, and she didn’t validate it with a reaction. It was what he was searching for, after all. She bit the inside of her lip and held his gaze, hoping he saw in her eyes how deeply he had betrayed her. Kylo glanced away first, staring off to his left before continuing, “I don’t know what you want from me.”

Rey shook her head. Fire was not burning down the world around them this time, but it still felt like it. “I don’t know what you want from me either. You say I’ve betrayed you, and maybe you’re right, but I can’t stand by and watch you destroy everything I loved about you. I don’t know who you are anymore...”

“Maybe you do,” he said, refusing to look at her, but she still witnessed him fight the grimace of pain. “Maybe I am exactly who I have always been, and you’re only just now realizing it... like they did.”
It wasn’t the first time she had been disappointed by another person. *Everyone* had disappointed her. *Everyone* had used her for their own selfish desires. She thought he had been different. Now, the only question left was, “What will you do now?”

Kylo didn’t have a chance to answer, however. Sidious had already refocused his attention on her bondmate. “You gave the First Order the very tool to secure her fate, but it is not too late, my young apprentice. You know what you have to do.”

“He would never join you,” she promised the monster. Kylo may have chosen to align himself with an evil army, but he would never serve that creature again. He *hated* him. Though she felt his uncertainty, *she* was certain.

*How do you know?* She expected him to demand of her.

She couldn’t have been more wrong.

“You really *don’t* know me, do you?”

When he raised his eyes to her, there was an apology in them, but something even more terrifying. He scanned her face as if he was memorizing it, as if he were saying goodbye. With a heavy exhale, he turned his back to her. Though she was terrified of what he would do, nothing could have prepared her for his next words to his former master. “If I join you, then they all go free?”

*What?!*

“Ben, no!” she screamed. The fear easily overwhelmed the anger, disappointment, and betrayal that had been suffocating her since she learned the truth about her parents’ death. Kylo was a liar, a manipulator, and a murderer, but something inside of her still begged to fight for him.

“They will be exiled to the Unknown Regions,” Sidious assured him. “Our Dark Army will not touch them.”

“Okay,” Kylo said, nodding through heaving breaths. “Okay.”
“That’s not true and you know it!” She begged him to see the truth she had shown him before, but she could already feel herself losing him again. Losing him for good. “He will never let us live!”

The Force was twisting and writhing around her, everything numbed away by the cold bleeding through her. It was achingly familiar. His stare was as absent and adrift as when he had stared at this creature’s fallen corpse on the throne. He was just as lost to her now.

Please, don’t do this, Ben. Don’t go this way.

“Kneel,” the monster commanded. “And it will be done.”

Rey didn’t care what he had done, she couldn’t allow this. Sprinting forward, she grabbed her bondmate by the arm, forcing his gaze away from Sidious. “You can’t do this, Ben!”

The eyes staring back at her were hollow and lifeless. There were tear tracks down his cheeks, his lips grimaced in pain, but he was resolute. “I have to do this,” he murmured. “Think what you want of me, but I can’t risk them finding you.”

It didn’t make sense. Even under the persuasive influence of darkness, she couldn’t rationalize it as evil. That contradiction was enough to give her further pause. If this was all a betrayal, as Sidious wanted her to believe, then why would Kylo join his former master to keep her safe? Unless… unless Kylo was the man that she believed him to be. He didn’t need to join Sidious to find her and murder her friends; he already had all the information he required. If Sidious wanted her to believe Kylo was a monster, then it was reason enough to believe he wasn’t. Rey couldn’t rationalize why her bondmate had done what he did, but she had to have hope that this could all be explained – without Sidious, when they had time to heal, after her mission on Ilum.

For it all to make sense, she had to believe that he didn’t want to join his former master, that he would only do it for her. It went against everything she believed about her own worth, but it was enough to ignore the pain in her chest and fight for him. If she was wrong, she would lose him. But if he was the man she believed him to be, then she knew there was only one way to stop him. Rey tightened her grip on his arm, forcing him to look at her. “I won’t let you,” she told him resolutely. “If you join him, I will still go find my Kyber crystal. I will fix my lightsaber. No matter what you do, I won’t join my friends in exile. I will come find you. If you think you’re protecting me by doing this, do you think you can protect me from his army?”

With a sharp inhale, Kylo clenched his eyes shut. He didn’t say anything, but he hadn’t turned from her or knelt at that creature’s feet. There was still a chance.

“There is only one reason why he hasn’t left the First Order,” Sidious reminded her. “Isn’t it
obvious? He doesn’t want to relinquish his power. He only desires for you to rule by his side. He wanted to destroy you until he discovered you killed your parents and believed you would fall to darkness. But he killed me because he wants you all to himself. Are you foolish enough to believe he would let you fly away with your general? He would never risk leaving the pilot and traitor alive. There is only one reason he would need to know your location. Haven’t you realized that as your darkness grows, so does his warmth toward you? You are nothing to him without your darkness. You are a fool, if you believe you –”

“Shut up!” Kylo screamed. “Shut up, shut up, shut up! I can’t take this anymore. You’ve put enough doubt in my head, but I refuse to let you do that to her!”

The alarm began to blare again. The sound was so abrupt, it almost dragged her back from his consciousness. She nearly lost the connection with him – nearly left him alone with a monster. Rey pushed back until she returned to his side in the training room. But it triggered a thought. If she had almost been pulled from the dream, perhaps she could pull them both from it. She had changed the dream once, after all. Perhaps she could end it. If Sidious was holding them there under the suppressive power of darkness, then maybe she could….

Would he trust her?

Sidious had torn their bond to pieces. Far too much damage had been done on both sides. If he wouldn’t allow her to take him away from that monster, then he would be lost to Sidious’s control. She may have been angry, betrayed and disappointed, but she still loved him. She wouldn’t leave him alone unless she had no other choice. Despite how deeply he had hurt her, he deserved this chance.

Rey stepped toward him, but he made no move to back away. The creature was silent as he stepped closer, perhaps anticipating violence in reaction to the revelations. Kylo remained silent as well; only his stormy eyes followed her movements as she closed the distance between them. There was still a significant part of her that wanted to slap him, but she reached forward and rested her hand on his temple instead. Closing her eyes, she released a slow breath and searched for the light.

It was difficult in her anger to find hope as everything they had built fell to ruin, but she found it in her love for him. Though he didn’t believe her, there was no “but” in the love she felt. Even after what he had done, the warmth, compassion, and loyalty were still as strong as his heartbeat in the Force. Through his memories – in both what was missing and what he experienced – Kylo had taught her what love was. He had taught her that love wasn’t conditional, it wasn’t easy, and the testament to its strength was not found in the happy moments. It was selfless and powerful and built on forgiveness. If he deserved her forgiveness for any of the wrongs he had done, this was it. This was love, she decided.
Forgiveness.

In that forgiveness, she had found a stronger light, a stronger hope. He was breathing heavily, struggling to reach the light in his own darkness, but she knew he understood her intention. He wasn’t fighting her. It gave her more hope that he was struggling to find the light as well. The warmth of the light bloomed in her chest, traveling through her body until she felt the oppressive blanket of darkness around them dissipating.

“No!” Sidious shouted, as a powerful wind blew through the room and knocked them off their feet.

Rey felt her consciousness sucked from the room, from his mind, and back to the ship. For a moment, Kylo remained on the Engineering Bay floor, unconscious as she had found him. The Force bond still swelled with disappointment, anger, and betrayal, but all traces of Sidious were gone. Rey crawled to him – to assure herself that he wasn’t hurt – but as she grasped his hand, he disappeared. The empty void he left behind matched the hollow ache in her heart. Shadows seeped into the empty spaces as reality set in. There was nothing she could do to fix the bond they had destroyed. Kylo was likely lost to her. But it was the loss of her own identity – the reminder of who she truly was – that shattered through the light she had found. She may have found the hope to forgive Kylo, but she couldn’t forgive herself. That revelation was what sent her spiraling into darkness.
Chapter End Notes

Description of death

Rey recounts a death she witnessed

Injury/Torture

Force Lightning is used briefly on Rey and Kylo
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Why are you going to Ilum? the voice whispered. You can feel the darkness inside you... Your crystal will be red... Everyone will know what you've done... You killed your parents... You will drag Kylo back to darkness with you... You will kill your friends... You will kill Kylo Ren... You will destroy everything you love... You will never be a Jedi... Stand by me... And become what you were meant to be.
There wasn’t a word for the devastation Rey felt. Her entire life had been a lie. She had suffered through all of it, believing her parents would come back for her. It had been easier believing that they were still alive. Looking back, she didn’t know why she never questioned it. When she finally admitted to herself that they were dead, it had been easier believing it was an accident. They had left her, what reason did she have to question how they died? But when she finally did… it was even easier believing that the man she loved had done it in his darkness. As painful as it had been, it made sense… the universe had made sense when it was him. When she had believed Kylo had done it, she still knew who she was.

What kind of person did that make her? Not only had she killed her own parents, but she had believed – even for a moment – that Kylo had the capability of murdering her parents. She knew who he truly was; that was why she had allowed herself to fall in love with him. But she should have realized who she was. Everything that had happened since she had left Jakku had proven she didn’t know herself. She had looked to Finn and Han and Maz, even Luke, to show her. They had tried in their own ways. Her bondmate, however, had held the key the entire time. He allowed her to believe that she was more than the product of a hellish world even when he knew the truth. Now that she knew it wasn’t him, it didn’t make sense why the Force had trusted him. At the time, he had been her enemy. Why would the Force give him that leverage? Was she meant to fall, too?

She had killed her parents. She had killed her parents. They had abandoned her on a harsh planet with a horrible monster, but that didn’t mean they had deserved to die. Maz had tried to warn her that her belonging was not with her family. Luke tried to warn her of her darkness. Kylo had believed she would turn when he saw that vision. They had all warned her in their own ways; she should have known. But now she felt like the old Rey was dead, and in her place was a monster.

You will never be a Jedi... It wasn’t a lie. She could never be a Jedi. Luke was right about her, Kylo was right about her; she went straight to darkness. Maybe that was why she was connected to Kylo, maybe she was fated to fall to the dark side all along. And when she inevitably fell, there would be no one to stand against the Dark Army. Everyone she loved would die, just like her family. Why had she ever believed she could save them? Why had she held such blind hope? She was nothing. Nobody. Just a monster who killed her parents. That was her place in all this.

You will drag Kylo back to darkness with you... She had shut him out after she had killed her parents, sentencing him to suffer alone. She was the reason he had fallen. If she had never joined the war, Han Solo would have never gone with Finn to Starkiller. Kylo would have never been forced to kill his father. Han Solo would still be alive. If she had never left the Resistance, she would have stopped Poe from his mutiny and Leia would have had the chance to get the treatment she needed. Leia would still be alive. If Rey hadn’t gone to the Supremacy and left Kylo, he would have never stormed the base on Crait. Luke wouldn’t have been forced to confront him; Leia would still have her brother and the galaxy their hero. Everything she had done had only ever pushed Kylo further from turning.

And he had been turning. When he faltered, it had ultimately been her doing. It had been her
words, her actions, her struggle that kept him immersed in darkness. Her secrets had pushed him right back into the clutches of the creature that had tortured him for years. By dragging him from that nightmare, she had only delayed the inevitable. Now that they were separated, he had no reason not to join Sidious. In trying to remain neutral between him and her friends, she had given Sidious everything he wanted. In trying to help him, she had sentenced him to die as Kylo Ren. Now he would die as the leader of the Dark Army.

The darkness was like a thousand needles, poking at her senses, demanding entry. What was the point in fighting it? She had pleaded with the Force to tell her who she was; this was it.

*You will destroy everything you love…* She would. No, she wouldn’t; she already had. It was too late. Hope was gone. The Dark Army would slaughter the Resistance. Poe would fight until the end, but it wouldn’t be enough. Rose would be brave in the face of death, but it wouldn’t save her. Finn would protect the ones he loved, but she would lose him, just as she had lost Leia, Luke, and Han. There was no saving them, because she had assured their fates. There was no saving Kylo. They would kill each other, and it would all be because of her.

Her thoughts raged around her, but she refused to let them out into the Force; she knew how dangerous that could be. So she allowed more darkness in to soothe them.

*You killed your parents… You will kill your friends… You will kill Kylo Ren…* Was this what the vision had tried to show her? Would *she* be the reason Finn was dead under that blanket? Would *she* be burdened with stopping her bondmate? Or… would she kill him when he tried to stop *her*? The darkness devoured her fear with rapacious need. The terrible claws of a monster found her in her darkness—she had felt it once before, in the throne room on the Supremacy, in the whispers in the darkness, in Kylo’s nightmare.

*Sidious.*

Visions not her own subjugated all her other thoughts. It began with the memory of her destroying the ill-fated ship, killing her parents over and over again with relentless brutality. New images of her parents screaming as the ship ripped apart, their horrifying deaths, their decomposing bodies in the sands overtook her senses. She remembered witnessing Kylo’s psychological torture in his memories. Distantly, she knew it wasn’t real, but it didn’t help that it all felt real. She couldn’t shut her eyes, she couldn’t plug her ears, she couldn’t turn away from the sickening images. It became her only reality.

The torment transformed from the past to the future—the death of her friends by her own hand. She could sense the vibration of the crackling red lightsaber in her fist, see the terror in her friends’ eyes, hear the agony in their screams. She could smell the iron in the blood that stained the
corridors of the *Millennium Falcon*, and the burning of tissue as the plasma blade met the resistance of their skin. She could feel the stickiness under her feet, the weight of their broken bodies, the unnatural chill of their skin.

Rey dropped to her knees, her fingernails clawing into her hair as she watched herself kill her friends in increasing ruthlessness. At first, the feel of the floor underneath her knees and the drag of her nails against her skin was grounding, but even those sensations dulled after an immeasurable amount of time. An hour, maybe? A year? Time didn’t exist there. There was no past or future. She screamed until her throat burned and clung to that last thread of reality. She knew all too soon the pain would fade, and she would be lost in helplessness against the endless onslaught of images. “Please make it stop,” she begged the room, and when her prayers went unheeded, “Please let me die.” The darkness held her prisoner; she was all alone.

Sidious had won.

“Rey!” she heard distant voices screaming her name, could feel real hands shaking her shoulders, but all she could see were the depraved images of her friends’ deaths. Finn was choking on his own blood. Rose’s neck was twisted into an unnatural position, though it was a better fate than Poe’s, who was left with a burned, smoking hole where his eye had once been. It didn’t matter if she could hear voices screaming for her, the death before her was her only reality. Soon those screams transformed to match the images in her head. She squeezed her eyes tight in a futile attempt to shut it all out. Her mind vaguely registered her bondmate’s energy in the Force, drowning in darkness, as the screams of her friends were silenced. There was a snap in the Force, and then it all disappeared.

Rey didn’t know how long she had been unconscious, but she sensed that she was no longer on the *Millennium Falcon*. She pushed through damaged, broken thoughts as she tried to remember what had happened. Cautiously, she blinked her eyes open. The depraved images were gone, but she couldn’t find it in her to feel relieved. She was kneeling in a room she had never seen before, but, somehow, she knew what the machine was... *Force Destiny*. The utilitarian design of the room left her with no doubt; Kylo had come for them, her friends had been captured and they had been dragged onto the *Finalizer*. She couldn’t find it in herself to feel anything. What did it matter now?

There was a large circular platform hovering over a pit in the center of the room. On the platform sat a Kyber crystal, submerged in a pool of bubbling dark liquid. A black obsidian ring was set atop the flat surface of the crystal. There were… brown boots in the liquid. Her eyes followed the boots up to a pair of muscular legs clad in grey trousers. They trailed further up to the body shackled to the vertical platform of the machine. The two circular rods surrounding the platform spun in intersecting arcs around the body, creating a blue sphere of Force around it. The rods spun so quickly that they became a blur, obscuring the identity of the person strapped to the machine. Each rotation created a humming sound that grew louder as the machine increased speed. All at once, there was a bright blast of light.
It reminded her of the moment that had been replaying relentlessly in her mind; the moment she killed her parents. She had been distracted by the machine— and for one fleeting instant— she had forgotten what she had done. It was a mistake she would swiftly rectify; she would never allow herself to forget it again. Rey allowed the darkness to flow inside uninhibited. She didn’t want to feel the pain anymore. The Force, however, had other ideas.

A pneumatic hiss jerked her attention to the machine before her. The circular arms had stilled in the rotation, the bubbles had ceased, and as the black pool settled, the room grew deathly silent. The darkness abandoned her as she looked upon the body secured in the restraints. His arms were shackled, his jacket-clad torso strapped to the platform. His face was obscured as his head hung forward lifelessly, but she knew without a doubt that he was her best friend. The numbness faded as a soul-rending grief tore through her body.

“Finn!” she cried, jumping across the pit to the platform before the walkway extended. With shaking hands, she untethered the straps and restraints with the Force. His body fell forward, but she caught him, supporting his full weight as she eased him to the floor of the platform. As she accessed the Force to feel for a pulse, his head tilted back into the light, illuminating his face. Rey cried out in anguish. She didn’t need the Force to know he was dead. The once bright, kind eyes of her best friend— her brother— were clouded and unseeing. All she could do was scream until her throat burned as sharply as the rage that was building inside her.

A movement behind her startled her. She turned, hot tears blurring her vision, as her bondmate— clad in full First Order regalia— dragged a body she didn’t recognize across the walkway to the machine. He chuckled darkly through his mask as he strapped and shackled the body to the machine, ignoring her as if he couldn’t see her, feel her, hear her agonized screams. Perhaps he did, he just didn’t care. She turned back to Finn, dragging him across the walkway as Kylo worked to restart the machine. “Why didn’t you leave!?” she screamed at the man she loved as she cradled her best friend lying lifeless in her arms. “Why didn’t you come with me!”

Though he had broken her heart with the secrets he kept, though the darkness had convinced her it was hopeless, Rey had never imagined this was where it would end. She had been angry, she didn’t understand why he had lied to her, she needed time to think, but she never thought he would do this. As broken and bereft as it would leave her, she had to accept that this was the path Kylo had chosen. It was over; she was too late to save him and now her friend had paid the ultimate price. Why hadn’t the Force awoken her earlier? Would there have been time, if she had found a way to stop it? Had she been given the chance to save Finn and stood idly by as the machine took his life?

“How did this happen, Ben?” she screamed at the man who continued to ignore her. She reached forward to touch Finn’s face, to prove to herself it was real. His eyes were bruised, and his lip was split open. It was clear that he had fought until his last breath. Her next words directed toward her bondmate were broken by sobs. “I don’t know who you are anymore... Kylo Ren, Ben Solo... I
don’t care what you call yourself; you’re not the man I thought you were.”

The machine whirred behind her, and her hopes shattered. Even when she had discovered that he was tracking her friends, she had believed that he wouldn’t hurt them. Even when he had been seconds away from kneeling before the monster, she had believed that he wouldn’t join Sidious. That had been her greatest fear. The rest of the consequences of their fallout had never crossed her mind.

Another glimpse of Finn’s unseeing stare made her stomach roll. She tried not to look at it, but her gaze was drawn there with sickening magnetism. Shutting her eyes, she tried to force away the image, but it was burned into her retinas. Her eyes snapped open at the sound of another hiss from the machine. She turned to see Kylo, still refusing to acknowledge her as he unstrapped the other man from the restraints. Unlike her best friend, this man was alive.

“I told you, didn’t I?” The man said. It wasn’t until his eyes turned to burn into hers that she understood he was speaking to her. They were a stranger’s eyes, yet there was something terrifyingly familiar about them. “Kylo Ren belongs to me, one way or another.”

Her voice broke on a sob. “Sidious.”

“Palpatine… Sidious… Snoke… this man was called Ka’tel,” he stepped forward and slid the black ring onto his finger. “Does the name matter?”

“Like ‘Ben?’”

“Ben was weak,” the creature sighed, as if the conversation bored him. “I found him, I saw his potential, he was nothing without me. I created Kylo Ren. After turning him against his family, only you stood in my way. A nothing girl from his dreams who killed her parents. You defeated him – left a permanent reminder of his failure – it should have been simple to convince him to destroy you. I encouraged the connection, I forced him to face your wrath, I showed him that you would never stand by his side. I felt your darkness, I could have easily manipulated your fall, but I did everything in my power to guarantee that you remained his enemy. I knew you could turn him against me, but I never thought I’d fail to turn him against you.”

“I paid for that misstep with my life,” he said, stepping closer.

“He even remained steadfast in his compassion for you long after you left him on the floor of that
rebelt base. You had his uncontestable loyalty. But I should thank you; because of you, I found the World Between Worlds. And as I wait for the future I was promised through those portals, you have been everything I could have hoped you would be. In your darkness, you broke his devotion to you all on your own. You helped Kylo Ren sever his pathetic hold on the light. Unlike the rest of his inferior bloodline, he will be more powerful than you can ever imagine. The cursed weakness of the Skywalkers’ sentiment ends with him.”

“You did it, okay?” she sobbed. “You took everything from me – you took him from me— what more do you want? To show me what I’ve lost?” From somewhere behind her, Rey heard Rose’s screams. She knew her friend would be next to meet her fate in that machine. It wasn’t too late for Rose. Rey could stop it, stop him. He had made his choice, could she make hers? Could she end his life to save her friend?

Rey stood, shaking as she suppressed a sob. She took her place between that monster and her bondmate, even if it was too late to protect him as she had promised. The darkness swelled around her. “No, you don’t want to show me anything. You want me to make an impossible choice! And I’ll do it…” she said, gasping in a shuddering breath. She turned to watch Kylo drag Rose into the room. She hoped her friend wouldn’t see her lifeless fiancé at Rey’s feet. “But when I do, I’ll know that all of this is your fault. You killed Finn and you’ll kill Rose too! You should be the one that pays for it, not them, not him!”

“I didn’t do anything. I gave him a choice; he made it,” Sidious responded, stepping even closer in challenge. Rey knew she would have to kill her bondmate, but she decided right then that she would kill Sidious first. She didn’t have a weapon, but she knew what weapon would respond to her call. The lightsaber hit her palm before her hand had fully extended. It felt familiar in her hand now. Fear exploded from her bondmate’s energy, piercing through the darkness. She grasped onto that bond between them, surprised that he hadn’t shut her out. Despite what he had done, it was her last source of comfort.

Rey considered the weapon in her hand; she intended to add to the lives it had taken. His eyes flicked down to Kylo’s lightsaber as if he dared her to use it against him. “Kill me, kill him, then what?” he chuckled. “Go back to Jakku? There’s no future for you; you’re no Jedi.”

“Shut up!” she screamed. With the wind of darkness howling through her, she swung the lightsaber at Sidious with powerful ferocity. She continued to scream as she slashed and thrust the blade at him, but he was able to escape the deadly blows with ease. He laughed wickedly as she fought with all her might to kill him. But if the blade landed too close, he used the Force to still her blade.

“Stop!” he commanded. Something sparked inside her with his words, something was different. Had she sensed something in him? Was it… fear?
Rey changed tactics. With her hand wielding Kylo’s lightsaber, she used the other to push him backward with the Force. One lucky strike knocked him off balance before he could block it, and she grazed his side with the unstable blade. “Murderer!” she screamed as she backed him across the walkway and into the Kyber crystal. Before she could run him through with it, he had manipulated the activation switch, triggering the plasma back into its housing. It only served to fuel her anger. “You took… everything… from me!”

“Don’t do this, Rey,” he said. Her hand nearly dropped the weapon in her agitation. Something about it felt terribly wrong, but she couldn’t think past her rage. Flashes of eyes – cruel in a monster, unseeing in her best friend, and warm in her bondmate over the last few connections – drowned all her other thoughts, feeding the hatred for this man. She would kill him for what he had done.

She jammed the hilt into his abdomen. “I won’t stop until I kill you.”

“Don’t,” he warned again. “Don’t do this.” Except… maybe it didn’t sound like a warning, maybe it sounded more like a plea. When had Sidious ever begged? Her hand moved to the trigger of her bondmate’s weapon, but his finger found it first. He pushed it back to prevent her from igniting it.

There was only one way she would spare his life. No matter what Kylo had done, she knew she couldn’t take his life. If Sidious gave Kylo back to her, they could heal Finn, they could save Rose, everything would be okay. “Give… him… back,” she demanded.

The creature looked past her to blastdoor. “He’s right outside the door,” he told her with a conniving smile, and she knew the creature had every intention of deceiving her. “If you put down the lightsaber then~”

“Give him back!” she demanded, knowing undoubtedly that he wouldn’t.

“Put it down,” he said, gesturing to the lightsaber, “and I will.” Rey narrowed her eyes in challenge. The monster stared at her for a moment, but she never held hope he would consider it. He had exactly what he wanted; he didn’t fear her or death, he had nothing to lose. “No,” he said finally, “I won’t do it.

Rey clenched her fist and cut off his airway with the Force. He didn’t fight back. As he collapsed to his knees in the pool of dark liquid, his blue eyes stared her down, almost as if he were goading her to finish it. She pressed her finger forward on the switch, waiting for him to lose consciousness so she could deliver his fate at the end of her blade. But something felt… off. His struggle, the defiant tilt of his chin, the flutter of his eyes was too familiar. It brought her back to Kylo’s memories,
when he had suffered by the wrath of this man. As he struggled for air, the man lifted his hand to touch her cheek.

His attempt to touch her as he had in the throne room jolted her into action. Rey allowed the darkness in, blocking everything else out. She cried out into the room as she pressed the ignition switch and thrust her lightsaber forward. It met slight resistance before her hands forced the blade through the man’s chest. Her heart did not soar with victory, however. She had killed Sidious; she should have felt relief, or peace, or happiness, or anything other than the foreboding shiver that had broken through the rage.

Something wasn’t right.

The man stared at her with a softness in his eyes that was inconsistent with those of a monster. She focused closer on those eyes as he struggled for breath. The blade had clearly done extensive damage to his lungs and his ability to breathe was compromised. It would be a swift death. The Force was screaming around her, but he was weaponless, as was her bondmate who she only just remembered was just outside the room. Rey glanced over her shoulder toward the door, but she was distracted. There was something different about the room, something not quite right, and it only added to the growing dread that had become impossible to ignore.

She turned back to the monster whose life was fading into the Force. As she searched his eyes, there was a flash of something in them like a glitch in the flight simulator back on Jakku. Fear prickled across her skin. There was something disastrously wrong.

In her panic, her eyes darted around the room as it shifted from Force Destiny to the Millennium Falcon indiscriminately. Was this real? She focused on the man’s eyes again; there was something... something familiar about them. Then they flashed from blue to brown to blue again. It was a split-second slip, but that understanding changed everything. This wasn’t real, or if it was, it wasn’t as it first seemed. She hadn’t killed Sidious in Force Destiny on the Finalizer. She wasn’t certain she was on the Finalizer at all. What had happened?

Rey focused on the man’s eyes, waiting for another change in them. She knew that strange glitch held the answer. She didn’t have to wait long. The blue veil slipped and revealed those brown eyes again, and this time, she was painfully aware of who they belonged to. “Ben?” The illusion faded instantly with her words. It was as if a blindfold had been removed; the man transformed before her eyes as his knees gave out underneath him.

No!
Even without the familiarity of his soulful eyes, raven hair, and smattering of freckles and moles, she would recognize his powerful energy anywhere. She didn’t know how Sidious had done it, but she knew what that creature had done. What she had done. Rey caught Kylo as he collapsed backward, sliding down the Kyber crystal and into the liquid. She helped him to his back in the shallow pool.

She pulled at his clothes frantically, doing more harm than good as she moved him. Not that it would have mattered; the rational part of her knew it would be fatal. The wound was bleeding—why was it bleeding?—settling in a pool on the floor. He smiled as he stared up at her, his hand grasping hers as she hopelessly tried to stem the flow.

“Ben, I’m so sorry,” she sobbed. “I love you. Stay with me, please.” Kylo tried to say something, but a heavy gasp trembled from his lips instead. His eyes fluttered closed, and his body went limp. No goodbye, no words for her to hold onto. Just like that, he was gone.

“No!” She pounded on his chest as she had done after he was wounded on Concordia, but she knew it was too late. “Come back!”

Kylo stared down at the large Kyber crystal in the shallow pool of black liquid of Force Destiny. The crystal shimmered in the low light, cast in a red glow by his lightsaber. Kylo was numb, mostly, and he presumed he was still in shock after their confrontation—after he had discovered the truth. Either it was shock, or he had already felt every emotion possible since he was dragged into that nightmare, and there was simply nothing left to feel. It had crushed the heart he thought had been destroyed years before. He wished it had been. That nightmare had been the worst torture he had ever faced, because the consequences were real. Now as he contemplated what needed to be done, he felt nothing. This was where his feet had led him after he awoke from that nightmare, because Sidious had revealed to him the only way to destroy the machine.

Sidious.

The monster that had tormented him his entire life was alive. Kylo should have felt… something. It was his worst fear realized. If his entire life couldn’t be summarized by his worst fear being realized, then perhaps he would have at least felt the impending doom. But he felt nothing, because deep down he had always known he would never be free of it. Inevitably, he would feel the revolting touch of Sidious’s energy in his mind again. Once he refused to lead Sidious’s Dark Army, his former master would likely control him through his darkness, and then there would be nothing left of him. Commanding the Dark Army—it was everything Kylo had once wanted; it was what he had sacrificed everything for. Power. Even if he genuinely trusted that Sidious would keep his word, he didn’t want it anymore. The galaxy, power, immortality… it meant nothing compared
with her.

After the secrets she learned, she would never trust him again. She had likely shut out the bond for good. He didn’t regret it – choosing not to reveal who killed her parents. He could have used it against her, used it to encourage her fall to darkness. But as she cried in that throne room, angry that he wouldn’t be the man she wanted him to be, for once, he had felt like he was doing the right thing. Clearly, she didn’t share that sentiment, though she had kept far more dangerous secrets from him.

Rey had betrayed him. This time, it wasn’t a choice made to protect the Resistance. He could forgive her for walking away in the throne room. He could forgive Kamino. He could forgive her intimacy with Dameron – his bitter enemy – as long as it was her choice then who was he to say who deserved her. He could forgive that she told her boyfriend about Force Destiny; it was something that could destroy the entire galaxy. If he failed, the Resistance would be the last – unlikely – line of defense to stop Sidious from returning.

What mattered was that Rey had lied about who had been manipulating her in the darkness. She could have killed him, or worse, she could have fallen to darkness. She could have died by his hand on Mustafar, because he didn’t know what could have been waiting for him there. Sidious had nearly convinced him to join him again, and Kylo would have, if he thought it would protect her. Kylo was certain that if he stood by and did nothing, then Sidious would do everything in his power to force another confrontation. His former master would find a way to force Kylo’s hand, either through coercion or mind control. That was how he found himself standing in Force Destiny. There was only one choice he had left to make.

Destroy Force Destiny.

Everything he had done to stop it had failed. Rey would never give him that text, especially not now. He was too immersed in light to use the holocron for help. It might as well have been a five billion credit rock. If he learned one thing other than Rey’s betrayal, it was just how dangerous Sidious’s return would be. Force Destiny had to be destroyed, and there was no other way to do it.

Kylo reversed his grip on the lightsaber and stretched his arms above his head, holding the weapon over the crystal, aiming the tip of the blade for its center. His former master’s inevitable victory could not be prevented, but he could destroy Force Destiny and delay his return. Everything had a cost—a price to be paid, a sacrifice to be made. Though Sidious had not revealed the cost of destroying Force Destiny, Kylo knew. His own Kyber crystal carried enough energy to kill him if it destabilized any further. A kyber of the size in Force Destiny carried an incredible amount of energy, more than thousands of lightsaber-sized kyber crystals. The moment he plunged his weapon into the depths of the Kyber crystal used in Force Destiny, it would be akin to releasing a seismic charge in Weapons Development. With the other powerful weapons in development, there would be a chain reaction that would bring down the ship. Kylo, and everything in the near
vicinity, would be vaporized.

Kylo hadn’t found any value in his life… for a long time. Ever, maybe. Certainly, he had fallen prey to the instinctual drive to fight for survival. After fighting for his life in the confrontation with Luke – after facing death too many times to count only to be spared by the Force – he began to attach meaning to his death. He began to imagine a death *worthy* of the years the Force had left him alive in torment. His life may never have held value, but his death *could*. Maybe she wouldn’t care if he was gone after what he had done, or maybe she still would. But this wasn’t like Kamino; this wasn’t a decision made in darkness. He would turn – perhaps not the way she wanted him to – but he would cripple the First Order long enough for there to be a few more decades of peace. His only regret was Blue would be a casualty. Kylo was grateful that droid was back in his chambers, completely unaware. His death would be nearly instant.

Steadying himself, Kylo drew the strength of the Force inside him, prepared to thrust that energy into the center of the crystal. He held his blade over the living conduit of energy in the Force, wondering if there was an afterlife for someone like him. It would be easier, he thought, to cease to exist entirely – like a droid. Even in a moment of resolution, he wavered. There was always a weakness stopping him from making the right choice, but Kylo couldn’t let the droid die. There were escape crafts. If he set the coordinates, he could send the droid to Bespin. Kylo was certain Blue would be safer with Lando than anyone else in the galaxy. His only fear was the attention the departure of an escape craft would draw.

Perhaps if he found Rey through the bond, one last time, *she* could take Blue. A book and a vial had passed between galaxies in their bond, perhaps a droid could as well. She hated him, but she was the most compassionate person he knew. He had to try. Lowering his barriers to the bond, he found that hers were already lowered as well.

He was met by a clawing, writhing sensation.

Then he heard her scream.

*Ben!*

He was sprinting to her before her form had fully appeared on the floor. Her hands were over her ears, clawing at her scalp. Her eyes were screwed shut, and she was screaming.

“Rey!” he called her, but there was not a flinch of recognition on her face. Prying her bloodied fingers from the side of her head, he shouted again. “What’s wrong! Answer me!”
“Thank the stars! It worked!”

His stare jerked up at the sound of the voice, finding Rey’s friend Rose across from him. In his fear, he had been so preoccupied with the sight of Rey on the floor, he hadn’t noticed the other presence in the room. He didn’t know anything about the woman; it could be an attempt to lure him into a trap. Rey had said they planned to ambush him, and Dameron was well aware of his… sentiment for her, after their last confrontation. What better way to lure him in than with the implication that Rey was in trouble?

Only, Rey was in trouble, and she trusted this woman. It could end in his death, needlessly wasting their chance to destroy Force Destiny, but he chose to trust her as well. “What happened?”

“I don’t know!” The fear in her voice could not be fabricated; this was no ambush. “I heard her screaming and found her like this. She won’t talk to me; she’s been crying and begging for it to stop. I didn’t know if she could hear me, but I told her to call you over your Force thing and she did. I thought you would know – ”

“Why didn’t you leave!” Rey cried. Her eyes were open, staring at him, but her gaze was… distant. “Why didn’t you come with me!”

He picked her up and held her tightly to him as if it was enough to protect her. “I told you I would, sweetheart. I don’t understand… What’s wrong?” It struck him then, that the name he called her—the same name his father called his mother—had somehow changed over their interactions from a sarcastic invective to a term of endearment. What’s more, he couldn't find it in himself to care, not even when he knew how deeply she hated him. All that mattered was she needed him.

“How did this happen, Ben?” Rey was shaking in his arms. There was no doubt she was talking to him, but she wasn’t talking to him. She was staring across the room as if she was talking to someone they couldn’t see, as if he wasn’t there. “I don't know who you are anymore... Kylo Ren, Ben Solo… I don't care what you call yourself; you're not the man I thought you were.” He knew she hated him, he knew she wanted him dead, but this seemed… different.

Kylo raised his eyes to meet those of her friend. He didn’t know what to do. What could he say? “Where are the others?”

Rose shook her head. “It’s just Finn and Chewie with us. Chewie is asleep on the single bunk, and Finn is manning the cockpit.”
“Okay, I need you to – ”

“Sidious,” Rey whispered. It was only then that he noticed the thick, heavy darkness spilling over from her side of the bond. This time, he knew it wasn’t all her darkness. At the touch of his former master’s vile energy, he slammed up the barriers in his mind. He couldn’t help her if Sidious was in his mind too. “I’ll destroy him, Rey, I promise—”

“Like ‘Ben?’” she asked sarcastically as she stood. Rose jumped to her feet. Kylo languidly stood, acquiescing to the inevitability of the situation, but with no urgency to face the unavoidable confrontation. The way she said his name sent a shiver over his skin. He had destroyed ‘Ben,’ years before she had stumbled into his life, and had told her as much countless times. Was she only now understanding that truth?

The Force was alight in warning. She was drawing in the energy around her, preparing for a fight. He could contain an energy blast, but Rose could not. “Go,” he commanded, but her friend didn’t move.

“Rey?” Rose shouted, but her call fell on deaf ears. Rey was lost in her darkness. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Darkness,” he rasped. He knew it all too well. Rey was strong, but this was stronger.

Her friend was brave; he’d give her that. Instead of fearing her darkness, instead of running away, she stayed. He had been wrong; Rey truly had found her family. These people wouldn’t abandon her like her parents did, they wouldn’t fear her like… he had been feared. Rose’s hand went to her tool belt. “How do we stop the darkness?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. It wasn’t lost on him that she had said “we,” that she seemed intent to put aside their differences to help her friend. She was at his side as if she trusted him, and he couldn’t disappoint her. “I’ll figure it out. Go.”

“I’m not leaving.” Rose had the same stubbornness as Rey, the same fight for the ones she cared for, but there was something Rey had that Rose didn’t. The Force. Rose stood no chance against his bondmate.

It was difficult to determine where the exit was located on their side of the bond, but judging by the
quick glance Rose made over her shoulder, it was likely behind them. Rey was standing with her hands clenched, eyes distant and glazed over, as the darkness pulsed around her. They couldn’t just lock her in the room because they were on a ship. An explosive energy could critically disrupt the integrity of the vessel. In the vacuum of open space, that meant instant death. If he was going to have any chance of containing it, he couldn’t risk any distractions, and injury to her friends was a very real potential complication. “I have the Force; you don’t. Get out. Now.”

Turning his back on Rey, but tracking her proximity in the Force, he reached for Rose’s arm to direct her out of the room and was moderately surprised when his hand wrapped around her solid form. He knew he could touch Rey, but this confirmed that they could interact fully with each other’s environments. The room faded from Force Destiny to the crew quarters on the Millennium Falcon, and he quickly found the exit. “Ben, I can help you,” Rose protested, but he dragged her to the blastdoor.

When it opened, they both came face-to-face with her profoundly alarmed fiancé. Though Kylo assumed congratulations and the like were in order for their engagement—he had witnessed it after all—he highly doubted it was an appropriate time to offer them. The former Stromtrooper’s gaze shifted from her to Kylo, down to Kylo’s hand on her arm, and back up to Rose again. Kylo sensed Rey approaching, but his thoughts were jarred when a fist crashed into his face.

“Yeah, you’re real.” Finn said. Kylo blinked away blood; evidently, the wound on his browbone had been reopened. When his focus returned to Finn, the man’s blaster was raised and aimed at Kylo in a respectably quick draw. “What the Hell is going on here?” Finn demanded. Kylo opened his mouth to shed light on the situation, but Finn gestured vaguely with the weapon, something that was achingly reminiscent of Han Solo. “No, not you,” he growled and turned to Rose.

“Finn, I can explain…” Rose said, stepping closer to Kylo as if she intended to block him from blasterfire. Or at least, attempt to block him, as it was no easy feat with their height and overall size differences. That part didn’t stick with him as much as the knowledge that she would try to protect her enemy from her fiancé. He knew it was for Rey’s sake, not his own, but the gesture—while foreign—was curiously meaningful. Unfortunately, he didn’t have time to ponder it further. Time was up; he couldn’t keep his back turned on Rey.

“You better start, Rose, because that looks like Kylo Ren is on this ship, and there better not be Kylo ‘scum of the galaxy’ Ren on our– ”

Kylo pushed into his frantic mind, severing Finn’s connection to consciousness before he could finish his sentence. As Finn slumped to the floor, Rose turned to Kylo, horrified. “Ben, what the –”

“You did it okay? You took everything from me,” he heard behind him and turned to find his
bondmate’s stricken face.

“Rey I…” he started, but what was there to say? Rey hated him; she made that much clear. He couldn’t blame this entirely on what Sidious was doing to her. The darkness would lead to her inevitable violent reaction, but that didn’t change that she didn’t want him there. Would she allow him to help her? Not likely. If he thought she had a chance to battle it on her own, he would have left, but he couldn’t leave her alone, not when this was all his fault.

“You took him from me,” she continued. “What more do you want? To show me what I’ve lost?”

Kylo narrowed his eyes in confusion. Took who?

“Rey?” Rose asked from somewhere behind him. “Who did he take from you?”

Kylo glanced at her friend just outside the blastdoor. Rose was kneeling next to her fiancé… her unconscious fiancé. Was he who Rey believed Kylo had taken from her? Did she think he – “Rey, your friend is fine. I didn’t kill him,” he explained, turning to Rose for help.

He was grateful when her friend immediately chimed in, “He’s just knocked out, Rey. He’s snoring. Come see, he’s –”

“No, you don’t want to show me anything.” Rey spat, nearly delirious in her anger. Her attention focused on him, but her eyes stared right through him. “You want me to make an impossible choice! And I’ll do it, but when I do, I’ll know that all of this is your fault. You killed Finn and you’ll kill Rose too! You should be the one that pays for it, not them, not him!” He hadn’t hurt her friend, but he knew she wouldn’t listen. The darkness wrapped around her as the Force shuddered again in warning. She had saved him on Kamino and after Concordia, because she believed in him. Did she wish now that she had let him die? Would she kill him?

Kylo received his answer promptly. The only warning he was afforded was a sharp spike in the Force, and then his lightsaber was ripped from his belt. This time, there was no sense of admiration or betrayal as he had once felt when she had taken his weapon from him. All he could bring himself to feel was… resignation. The lightsaber ignited, and Rose withdrew her electro-prod from her toolbelt. But Kylo Kylo shut the blastdoor before the red plasma blade came down between them, nearly severing his arm. Locking the blastdoor with the Force, he pivoted to narrowly evade the blade a second time. “I didn’t kill him, Rey!” he tried. “He’s fine! Rose is fine! Don’t listen to the darkness!”
“Shut up!” she screamed, as darkness howled through the room, surrounding them both. Rey’s eyes were merciless as she swung at him again. He was for once grateful for Luke’s teaching; he had never believed learning blocks in the Force against a lightsaber would ever come in handy. He had been impatient and frustrated, because he would rather learn to wield the weapon itself. Now he admitted the training had its place, as he used small Force pushes to halt or redirect the blade.

Swinging her blade wide, she forced him to jump back. The blade caught his outer thigh in his distraction. Thankfully, it missed the major artery. He would take a cauterized lightsaber wound over a blaster shot any day.

Realizing that he couldn’t avoid a fatal wound if he faced her much longer, Kylo tried to wrap her with the Force to stall her movements. But she blocked his actions in the Force. Or Sidious had. “Stop!” he demanded, but his words and Force manipulations only seemed to incense her more.

“Murderer!” she screamed, channeling her rage into every swing, immersing herself fully in the darkness. The unstable blade barely missed his face as she swung again. When he used the Force to redirect her blade, she altered her strategy. One arm thrust the weapon at his abdomen, the other attempted to drag him forward with the Force. He succeeded in resisting it and avoiding the strike, but the situation had escalated to dangerous levels. He shook the blood from his eyes, which had begun dripping down his cheek to the floor. After a particularly alarming near miss, a blast of energy shoved him backward. He nearly lost connection to her side of the bond, and his surroundings faded from her crew quarters to Force Destiny. He gripped the Force to regain balance, but she was relentless, grazing his side in her attack. “You took… everything… from me!”

With wild swings, she backed him into the Kyber crystal at the base of Force Destiny. Before he took a direct hit to the heart, he manipulated the activation switch with the Force, triggering the plasma back into its housing. Rey stepped forward and pressed the hilt to his abdomen. “Don’t do this, Rey.” A flash of a vision replayed in his mind. Kylo feared this was it, this was what he had foreseen. Rey’s dark, emotionless eyes stared up at him as her thumb found the activator switch.

She shoved the hilt more forcefully into his chest. “I won’t stop until I kill you!” The sharp edges of the crystal cut into his back.

“Don’t,” he murmured. “Don’t do this,” he tried to reason with her, hands raised in supplication. There was something that sparked in her eyes at the words, he thought for a moment he had broken through the darkness.

“Give…him… back.”

Kylo attempted to slide away from her, but the Force held him in place. “He’s right outside the
door, if you put down the lightsaber then–”

“Give him back!” she demanded

“Put it down and I will!” he shouted back.

*Let me in… Kylo Ren…* a sickening voice whispered in his head. *She is under my control… and mine alone… Lead my Dark Army…or she will…*

*Sidious.*

“Rey, give me the lightsaber.” Rose had reentered the room at some point; her fiancée was fortuitously missing. Though Rey needed to see him, Kylo didn’t want to be there when he awoke. Rose continued to attempt to reason with her friend, but he ignored her pleas and spoke directly to his former master.

*What about Rey?*

*If I have the last Skywalker…then I don’t need her…do I?… If you want to protect her… what better way to do it… then with the strength of every powerful Force-wielder… who has ever lived?*

Kylo shook his head. Sidious would never risk another betrayal. He didn’t want Maul, or Bane, or Revan; he wanted their *power.* They would all be under his mind control, just as Kylo would be if he accepted. If Sideous truly needed a commander for his Dark Army, Rey was a better choice. With control over her, he could ambush the Resistance and end the war once and for all. If he was offering Kylo a choice, it meant he already intended to use her, and it was a trap…or this was not about winning the war. He guessed the latter. If Sidious wanted *him,* after everything he had done, it could only serve as a means of vengeance.

Sidious hated the Skywalkers. He wanted Kylo to command his Dark Army so he could control him. Kylo imagined it—surrendering to the power of his former master. He would have to prove his loyalty, most likely by reincarnating Sidious through *Force Destiny.* Kylo would be back under the creature’s control—and in his grasp—but he would be given unimaginable power over many of the strongest Force-users that had ever lived. If Sidious was to be believed, she would be safe.
Maybe Kylo would have agreed, if the voice inside told him she would be safe. Sidious had said that if he had the last Skywalker, then he wouldn’t need her. But Kylo wasn’t foolish enough to believe Sidious would leave her alone. He had proven that he feared Kylo’s sentiment and would do anything to destroy his ties to everyone else. Kylo would have traded places with her in a heartbeat if he believed Sidious would keep his word. Kylo knew, however, that the moment he opened his mind, Sidious would use him to kill her. He also knew what Sidious would do if he refused.

“No,” he finally managed, “I won’t do it.”

Worthless scion… your use to me has come to an end… I should have rid myself of your weakness long ago… Rey jammed the hilt harder against his abdomen. Her finger rocked forward to press on the activator, but his hand shot out for the switch. He pushed her finger backward off the trigger, overpowering her. If Rey wanted to kill him when she had control over her own mind, that was one thing, but he would do what he could to stop Sidious.

“Rey!” Rose shouted as the Force wrapped around his throat. He was well-acquainted with the feeling of hopelessness as his body screamed for air, nauseatingly so. Sidious knew he wouldn’t fight back. He grasped onto the Force, not to use against Sidious—against Rey—but for the strength to immobilize his body and to hold on for as long as he could. There was a particular comfort in familiar pain. He recognized the burning in his lungs, the dots that twinkled through his vision, the thrashing of his heartbeat in his ears. It was predictable; there was the fading of the pain, then the slight sense of euphoria in his oxygen-starved mind. He knew when the darkness began to encompass his vision, that the shadow of unconsciousness was near. Of the brushes with fate he had avoided, and the fate he had delivered onto others, he knew it wasn’t the worst way to die.

Rey cocked her head to the side as she drained his lifeforce. His free hand moved to cup her cheek, to try to silently break through the darkness in her. Those eyes—he didn’t know how, but they weren’t hers. There was more than darkness in them; there was something evil... but familiar. It was as if he was staring through hers and into Sidious’ eyes.

His own eyes burned, so he let them fall closed. He took solace in picturing Rey’s sunlight eyes rather than the ones before him; the ones belonging to a monster. It would be a better memory to take with him into the darkness, he decided. The pain subsided, and he knew it was over. At last, his fingers slipped off the activation switch. As he drifted into unconsciousness, he awaited the brief, concentrated pain he knew would come as the blade pierced through him.

There was a jolt of a body slamming into him instead. The cool relief of air flooded into his lungs, and an involuntary coughing fit convulsed through him. Sound returned, as did the pain, and his eyes snapped open to screams. Rose was straddling Rey on the floor, attempting to pull the lightsaber from her grasp. Lifting his arm fatigued by oxygen deprivation, he used what limited
control he had over the Force to immobilize Rey’s movements. It was only temporary, but it gave her friend the chance to distance herself from her.

Kylo collapsed against the crystal as he steadied his breathing. His body begged for him for sleep, but he knew Rey needed his help. He couldn’t leave her to battle Sidious alone. “Ben,” his name brought his attention back to her friend. “I asked if you’re okay.” It was a question entirely foreign to hear from another person. Rose nodded to the burn mark on his tunic where the lightsaber had grazed him. “We have Bacta patches if you need –”

“It’s just a scratch,” he assured her as he gulped in painful breaths.

“What about that?” she asked, gesturing to his nose.

“It happens sometimes after the Force choking.” He said, wiping the blood trickling from his nose. “It’ll stop.” There was a look in Rose’s eyes that made him uncomfortable, something that made him feel vulnerable and exposed. Rose looked as if she would ask him something more, but she nodded her head instead. He was thankful she let it go.

“Ben, I’m so sorry!” Rey screamed in agony, breaking through the silence and her meager Force restraints. Her hands returned to her head as she clawed at her temples. “I love you. Stay with me, please!”

Kylo pushed himself to a stand, called the lightsaber to his hand, and secured it on his belt. Kneeling next to Rey, he turned to her friend. “I have to use the Force to go inside Rey’s mind. I need you to take your blaster, set it to stun and aim it at that door. If anyone comes through it, stun them,” he directed, knowing she had zero cause to listen to him. “If they kill me, I can’t help Rey.”

Rose considered him and his momentous request. He knew what he was asking of her; she had no reason to trust a murderer as she aimed a blaster toward her own fiancé. She had her enemy perform something on her friend that she couldn’t understand, but she nodded anyway. “No,” Rey cried. “Come back.”

Kylo closed his eyes and pushed past her defenses and into her mind.

Just the touch of his master’s revolting energy repulsed him; it took everything in him not to pull away. Steeling himself, he immersed himself in the darkness. This was no nightmare; he knew what torture she likely faced. He could feel her despair. He remembered the torture well. When the
mind was convinced fantasy was reality, then reality became subjective. The hell Rey was suffering was her only reality. His entire body vibrated in fear as he pushed forward into her mind.

Kylo expected the barriers to be relatively simple to push through with the assistance of the bond. What wasn’t expected was when she shoved him backward with the Force. When he regained focus, he was on his back on the floor of Force Destiny, or perhaps it was the Millennium Falcon; it changed depending upon what part of the room he stared at. His breaths were shallow until the pain from his chest subsided; his muscles protested as he forced himself up. He attempted to press into her mind again but was thrown out even more forcefully than before. The ache hadn’t fully subsided by the time he tried again, only to be shoved out again. He groaned as he forced himself up again, his body shaking with the exertion. “I can’t do it; she won’t let me in.”

He was never one to learn anything quickly, but he recognized when a change in tactic was needed. The question was, what else could he do? She wouldn’t allow him to help her. He shifted to his knees beside Rey, who was still hopelessly unconscious, as he searched for the right answer; something that had never been easy to come by in his life.

Rose stared at him, horrified. Would she blame him for what was happening to Rey? Or for what he did to her fiancé? He was their enemy; would she call for the others? Thankfully, she spoke first. “What… just… happened?”

What was he supposed to tell her? The truth? She wasn’t stupid; she had seen what happened to Rey. Could he trust her? Did he have a choice? He needed help. “Did she tell you about Snoke?”

“I know who he was.” Her voice betrayed her surprise. Evidently, she didn’t believe he would be truthful with her either. "What about him?”

“He’s been in her head since Crait,” he said, admitting it aloud so he could force himself to accept the reality.

“What? That’s impossible. He’s dead.”

If he had been told the same truth a day before, he would have reacted with equal incredulity. He wished he could tell her it was impossible. But he knew what he endured—what he felt—the monster was still conscious somewhere between life and death. He had to ensure he stayed there. “Trust me,” he sighed. “I know, I killed him.”
Rose’s brows fluttered in confusion. “I thought Rey killed Snoke.”

Kylo had forgotten about the bounty. It felt wrong, putting more blood on Rey’s hands, especially for a death she hadn’t committed. “He used the bond to lure her to the Supremacy; he left me no choice.”

“You did it to save her from him,” Rose realized.

“….To save her from myself,” he corrected with more ire than he intended. She didn’t react in fear, but he still softened his voice when he spoke again. “He ordered me to kill her.”

Rose studied him closely, and if he wasn’t focused on his fear for Rey, it would have troubled him more. Whatever she found in her search, it couldn’t have been the truth, because a soft grin lifted her cheeks. “And you killed him instead?”

He thought he had. He thought he had finally been free. In one day, he thought he had rid himself of the two men who had shaped him into the creature he had become. They had both chosen to find Rey in death instead, and without the help of one of them, he didn’t know how he would stop the other from returning. “Not for good,” he said, staring down at the woman who was lost to the monster he’d sworn to protect her from. “I discovered he’s actually Sidious and had a machine that can reincarnate him. I had no idea he was in her head until today. I promise, I’m doing everything I can to stop him for good.”

His mind flashed to the moment in Force Destiny before he found her on the floor. While he had been searching for the strength to destroy the machine, that monster had been torturing Rey. He still was. Kylo could have destroyed the machine, stopped him from returning, but he couldn’t have saved her. Falling with Force Destiny, he would have left her alone with Sidious. His hand found hers in silent apology.

He doubted it gave her much comfort – if she even recognized the gesture at all as she battled the darkness in her mind – but he threaded his fingers in hers anyway. Rey had stood by him, she had fought for him, she had flown across the galaxy and hadn’t given up on him. She had hope in him when no one else did. He should have gone with her, after their battle in the throne room, then Sidious would have never found his way in. Even as she battled her own darkness, Rey had stayed by him. Certainly, she had said horrible things, she had listened to the darkness, but in the end, she had always held out hope for him. At least, until he betrayed her and left her mind to be torn apart by his former master. He knew the battle of darkness more than anyone. Perhaps others may have turned their back on her after what she had done, but not him. Just as she had seen the man he was through the darkness, he saw her.
He intended to keep that promise. The only problem was – how could he kill an immortal man more powerful than death itself?

Kylo only broke his stare from Rey when her friend shifted to stand. “So we’re fighting Sidious, too? That… complicates things, doesn’t it?”

He knew Rey had told Dameron about Force Destiny, had she not told her friends? “How has she not told you any of this?” he asked the woman as she crossed the room. “I thought you were close?”

Without looking back at him, she answered with a shrug, “Rey didn’t tell me about Snoke, but she did tell me about you. Except for the ‘Kylo Ren’ thing. I had to figure that out on my own.” She paused, turning to glance at him over her shoulder. “I remember what you said about him, you know.”

Kylo hummed, dropping his stare back to his reposed bondmate, much as he had when he first met her friend. Only this time, the demons haunting Rey were not her own. And Rose knew exactly who he was. He still didn’t know why he had opened up to the woman, why he had allowed her to believe he was Ben Solo. Nor did he know why she had never confronted him about it when she discovered his true identity. In fact, her kindness toward him had never faltered. She treated him the same as Ben Solo as she did as Kylo Ren. He knew it was for her friend’s sake, but that – coupled with the fact that she had saved his life earlier – left him little reason not to trust her.

“She just wants you to turn, Ben.”

It was enough to draw his attention back to Rose. He was momentarily dumbfounded by this woman calling him a name that wasn’t meant for her enemy. She knew who he was now, yet she still called him by that name. “She doesn’t want anything to do with me, she hates me.”

“How could you think that?” Rose said as she bent to rummage through items under one of the bunks. “I’ve seen the way she looks at you.”

“How could you think that?” Rose said as she bent to rummage through items under one of the bunks. “I’ve seen the way she looks at you.”

“Because I… I hurt her,” he murmured, turning his eyes back to his bondmate. Her eyes were open but unresponsive. Terror twisted through her features, and there was nothing he could do to help her. He didn’t know why he continued to reveal truths to a woman who fought for a cause prepared
to assassinate him, but nothing seemed to matter anymore when he felt so hopeless. “The last time I saw her, Sidious forced us to tell each other our... secrets.”

“Secrets?”

“She hid this from me – the darkness,” he said, gesturing to Rey’s struggle with his former master. “And her... intimate relationship with your general.”

When Rose laughed, he flinched; he hadn’t expected her to be kneeling next to him again. Only this time, she was kneeling on the side farthest from Rey. When he turned to her, she reached for his injured side. He grasped her wrist to halt her progress, but she smacked his hand away with a shake of her head and a grumble about “men.” He held his breath, but he didn’t fight her as she lifted his tunic to reach his wound. He sat paralyzed as she inspected the injury; he didn’t trust anyone to touch him other than Rey. It was uncomfortable and unsettling. She did everything in her power not to hurt him. “It was a lie, you know,” she said as she cautiously cleaned the wound. “The only secret relationship Rey has is with you, Supreme Leader.”

Kylo didn’t answer. Rey had told her general about Force Destiny—after she had trusted him with the vial and he had destroyed Kamino. She defended the man and trusted him even though he was using her. What reason would she have to do that if she didn’t have a relationship with him? “I’m curious,” Rose said, interrupting his growing resentment toward the general. “What secrets did Sidious reveal to Rey about you?”

He winced when Rose applied a salve to the wound, nearly forgetting in her gentleness that he had allowed her to touch him. “My explicit knowledge of the location of your new base.”

Rose hummed, continuing to work without much of a reaction at all. “And what do you plan to do with that knowledge?”

“Nothing I haven’t already done,” he said with a mirthless huff. “I was the one who gave Maz the coordinates and the navigational routes that kept the Resistance away from the detection of the First Order.”

Those words finally earned him the woman’s stare. There was no terror, or outrage, or disappointment in her eyes. There was confusion, but also... hope. “Why didn’t you tell her?”

He scoffed. “I knew how she would react if I told her. She was angry that I knew about your base
at the temple on Barkhesh; she would have never gone to Dantooine if she knew. She was supposed to be there right now. Safe. Not on an adventure to restore her lightsaber when the entire First Order is searching for the *Falcon.*” He leveled an agitated glare at Rey’s friend.

“The entire First Order… but not you?” Her hands were still on his wound, but she held her stare. “You’re not searching for the Resistance?”

Kylo glanced away from her then, choosing to stare down at his bondmate instead. It wasn’t an easy answer. When he knew where she was, he didn’t search for her, but now that she was flying somewhere in the galaxy without his help in hiding them from the First Order, he was terrified. He would search for her – to protect her – but as for the Resistance? “I told you, I already know where they are.”

Rose returned to her work. “And it would ensure victory for the First Order if you found them.”

“I never cared about the First Order!”

Kylo knew he shouldn’t have shouted, but she didn’t argue with him or condemn him for his reaction. Rose worked in silence, even when he growled as she placed a freezing salve on his wound. He finally realized she was waiting for him to continue. “I was a monster,” he said, “to everyone, because of the darkness inside me. I didn’t know it was Sidious whispering in my head, I didn’t realize that he was slowly turning me against them. Not that they helped prevent that. I tried to ignore him, to suppress the darkness, I just *wanted* to be good. I tried. My last chance was when my uncle took me as his student. I thought if I could be a Jedi, I could prove to them all that I wasn’t a monster. But even *he* lost hope in me; he saw the darkness and tried to kill me. It felt like there was nowhere left to turn but Sidious.”

Kylo couldn’t bear to glance up at her, to see the expression on her face, but he knew she was listening. Her fingers had stalled in their work of dressing his wound. “So I joined him,” he said softly. “I became the thing they all feared I would be. But I didn’t care about the First Order, I just wanted to destroy the Jedi… I wanted to destroy my uncle. I wanted revenge for what he had done. And my mother had given everything to the New Republic, but I saw it for what it was. I just… I just wanted to fix everything that was wrong with the galaxy. The spice addiction, the slavery, the control of the crime syndicates – the failures of the New Republic. I wanted to eliminate the chaos of the galaxy in ways my mother or uncle never could. I thought the First Order was the way to do that. I thought… I thought I could create the change no one else could, even if that made me the bad guy in the eyes of people like you or your friends.”

“What about Hays Minor?” Rose asked as her hand continued their work on his wound. “Did you lead that invasion?”
Kylo shook his head in confusion. What did any of this have to do with simple negotiations over ore? “The blockade of the Otomok system? That was Hux.”

“It was not just a blockade,” Rose said, voice low. Not when they had met, or when he admitted he knew their whereabouts, or when he had rendered her fiancé unconscious had he heard anger in the woman’s voice. But he did hear it then, when she spoke about a planet inconsequential to the war. “The First Order forced my family and our people to become slaves to mine ore for their war machine. They destroyed our planet with their pollution, and then after my sister and I escaped, they massacred our people—our family—to test their weapons.”

The First Order was supposed to create order, not chaos. They were supposed to stop the slavery and lawlessness that had grown rampant under the stagnant Republic. Massacring and enslaving worlds that weren’t fighting back, when had that become First Order policy? Had his master told him the truth about his missions in the Unknown Regions? Had the worlds and people been a threat to the First Order as he had been told? “I didn’t know,” he whispered.

“Or you didn’t want to know,” Rose said, not unkindly, as she placed a Bacta patch on his side.

“You’re right.” The familiarity of his self-focused loathing was a small comfort when confronted with what the First Order had done—what he had done. How had he not seen it? Everything he had believed was a lie; it was a common theme in his life, but that didn’t lead him any closer to the truth. “I was leading the invasion of worlds and murdering villagers, and I convinced myself it was necessary until I stood on the Finalizer and watched them destroy Hosnian Prime. Then I met Rey and she called me a ‘creature in a mask,’ and I knew I was a monster, but I couldn’t understand why I wanted to prove her wrong.”

“You’re not a monster, Ben.” “That thing in her head is.”

“But I’m the reason he’s there.”

“If you want to stop him, then it sounds like you don’t belong with the First Order at all.”

“I suppose it would sound like that, wouldn’t it?”

“So what changed, Ben?” She asked, breaking him from his thoughts. He glanced back to Rey as her friend rolled his tunic back over the wound. Staring down at his bondmate, he
knew exactly when everything had changed. It wasn’t a “what” that had caused the change, however, but “who.”

“Rey.”

“Even if your only motivation is to protect Rey, you know Rey is not with the Resistance. So why are you protecting them? Now that you know we’re gone, you could destroy Dantooine and win this war.” It was the truth. There was nothing he could say to justify the decisions he made that directly conflicted with those of the First Order. What he had done – what he had refused to do – his younger self under Snoke would have called him a “traitor.” That realization didn’t bother him at all. Rose smiled knowingly when he bit his lip and refused to answer. “You could keep us safe by joining the Resistance, you know,” she said softly. “Having you on our side could change the tide of the war. You and Rey would be stronger together.”

“Then who would stop the First Order from finding you?”

Stilling her hand as she returned the supplies to her medpac, Rose stared up at him with something like realization. “Is that why you still stay?”

Kylo hardened his jaw as his eyes returned to Rey. Yes, he was a traitor. No, his ideals no longer aligned with the First Order. Before they had separated, she’d told him that she could never share her location with him as long as his allegiance was to the First Order. Part of him had realized then that, somewhere along the way, protecting her—and the Resistance by proxy—from Sidious and the war machine he had helped create had become his only purpose. But that was far different than admitting that protecting her was the only reason he stayed. It was terrifying, because perhaps it wasn’t a strong enough reason at all. What did it matter now that Rey hated him? The old voices in his head told him he was weak in his compassion for her, that she would abandon and betray like the others. They reminded him that she already had. You are nothing without the darkness, they convinced him. Power will never leave; power will never lie. When he finally answered her question, he hid behind doubt instead. “I’ve sacrificed everything for the dark side.”

“And?”

“And if I left, those sacrifices would have been for nothing,” he snapped. Kylo convinced himself that he didn’t have time to argue this with her. It didn’t matter why he stayed. Rey was trapped inside her mind by his former master. He had to help her, not argue with her friend about his reasons for remaining with the First Order.

“But all of those sacrifices are in the past, Ben,” she reasoned. Didn’t she know what he had done?
Why didn’t she fear him? It was clear she wasn’t afraid as she grasped onto his arm to focus his attention. “The people you killed will still be dead whether you stay or turn. In fact, some of them died in the hope you would turn. That doesn’t sound like ‘nothing’ to me. And if you stay, then you’ll have to make more sacrifices for a cause you no longer believe in. The question isn’t how much you’ve already sacrificed, but how much more you’re willing to sacrifice.”

He hated that her words rang true. The question, however, was not about how much more he was willing to sacrifice, but why he had made those sacrifices. It wasn’t for Snoke or Luke anymore —this loyalty couldn’t be broken. “I’ll sacrifice whatever is necessary to keep Rey safe.”

“What happens when you can’t protect her anymore? With or without you, the Resistance will eventually face the First Order.” The statement hung in the air between them, allowing the potential consequences to take root. It was effective. Kylo felt sympathy for her future husband; he would never win an argument with this woman.

“You don’t need me to win this war,” he murmured.

“I know,” she assured him. “I believe in Poe as a capable leader, I believe in our hope, and I believe in Rey.” It was the truth, but it was oddly relieving to imagine a destiny not intertwined with the outcome of the war. “But that doesn’t mean we don’t want you on our side,” she said. “Whether you are with us or not, I know Rey will fight to save the galaxy. She doesn’t need you to turn, but she still hopes you’ll fight by her side. Rey has been suffering from darkness, and maybe there’s a lot I don’t know about her, but I do know one thing; Rey loves you. And when she has allowed herself to be vulnerable around us, it has all been about you.”

His only response was a soft hum. He had no doubt she had told them all about him, especially after what Sidious had forced him to reveal.

Rose seemed to understand his line of thinking. “Not like that, Ben,” she sighed. “Listen, when Rey and I first met, right after we landed on Barkhesh, she told me about the man who had broken her heart. I knew then that she loved you. And then after she kissed Poe to protect you, she told me about your fight. That was the day I found out you were Leia’s son — Ben Solo. She was terrified because she couldn’t find you in the Force. When I told her to go find you, she said she had tried that before. She was convinced you didn’t love her, because she wasn’t enough to convince you to come home. When I suggested she let you go, she said, ‘I don’t want to let him go, I just want him to be the man I know he can be.’ Then I met you, and realized your journey home would be more complicated than your feelings for Rey, because that was the day I realized that you loved her too.”

Rose smiled when he met her eyes. Every bit of self-preservation – years of walls he had built around his weak, fragile heart – begged him to deny Rose’s claims. But his throat couldn’t find the
words. “I know you helped us when the reconnaissance ship landed on Barkhesh. And I know she lied about your bond to the Resistance. You both have committed treason for each other. The love is there, but it will never work as long as you both are on opposite sides. I can’t imagine what it would be like to live a lie like you are with the First Order while trying to protect someone they are trying to kill. And I know living like this is tearing her apart, too.

“When Leia died, Poe made it clear that Rey would be tasked to kill you in an ambush. She fainted when she heard that news. And then she protected you from Finn – her best friend. She felt helpless in the war room. She tried to give Poe the vial to prevent another conflict between you and our general. She is doing everything she can to protect you, but we both know it’s only delaying the inevitable. Rey is desperate to fix her lightsaber so she is not caught helpless again in another confrontation. Poe has already used you against her, and I’m worried he’s waiting for her to fix this lightsaber before he does it again. Is that what you want?” she asked. Kylo shook his head. It was everything he was trying to prevent.

“Then you need to decide what you want to do, what side you want to fight for. Rey’s mistake was believing love was reason enough for you to leave, and yours is believing that it is reason enough to stay. I think you need to take Rey completely out of this and really think about why you’re with them.” Sensing his wavering resolve, she moved in for the final blow. “You can’t stop the inevitable battle between the Resistance and the First Order, but you can choose which side you’re fighting on.”

Kylo said nothing in return. There was nothing for him to say. Rose didn’t have the same trouble. “Until then, Rey will find her crystal, and then we’ll return to the Resistance on Dantooine. As long as your army doesn’t come for us, we’ll be safe on Ilum. But you know it’s only a matter of time before—”

“Ilum?” Kylo jolted as his mind stalled on her words. “You’re going to Ilum? You’re taking the most wanted woman in the galaxy…in the most wanted ship in the galaxy…to the First Order’s largest Kyber mining facility since Starkiller…. Have you all lost your minds?!”

The confusion on Rose’s face genuine, which concerned him further. “But Poe said…”

Dameron knew better than anyone that Ilum was a death trap for the Resistance. Of all the worlds with Kyber in the galaxy, why had he allowed them to go there? It only intensified his fear that Rose was right, and the clash between the Resistance and First Order was near. Kylo turned back to Rey with a new resolve. “When I finish with this, turn that ship around; I don’t care what Poe Dameron tells you.”

“I thought she was shutting you out. How will you help her?” Rose asked.
“I don’t know. Sidious controls us through the darkness, and, after what I did, she can’t and won’t force it out on her own. I can’t exactly take away the darkness…” His eyes shifted up to Rose’s stare as the realization settled over him. Take away the darkness. “I am going to try something I’ve never done before. I don’t know what this will do to me; but if I fail, if I turn on you or her, don’t hesitate—you point that blaster at my head, set it to lethal, and pull the trigger.”

He didn’t wait for her to respond, placing his hands on either side of Rey’s head. Instead of pushing into her mind again, he dropped all his barriers and grasped onto her darkness, drawing it into himself, away from her. It wasn’t the first time he had drawn in the darkness, but he found he hated the feeling, everything inside him fought against drowning in it. He tightened his muscles reflexively as the vile touch of Sidious’s energy slithered into his mind, but he only pushed harder to draw it in. He would fall to his former master’s control forever before he allowed Rey to endure what he’d suffered under that creature.

With a snap, he was no longer seated by her side but back in Force Destiny. There was a pressure on his mind like a thousand needles pointed at his thoughts, prepared to take them hostage. He knew how this worked; Sidious had used it too many times to count. If he thought of a good memory, Sidious would change it, forever taint it to something depraved. If he thought of a terrible memory or a fear, it would manifest itself before him. Few thoughts were safe; First Order propaganda, worship of his grandfather, his admiration of his master, the acts he had committed to surrender himself to the darkness. His mind would inevitably slip, however, and the torment would begin. Once he lost control of his thoughts, it was difficult to regain until the training was done.

He didn’t have that kind of time. Poe Dameron had been foolish or vindictive enough to send Rey straight into the waiting hands of the enemy. She would resist imprisonment and risk a lethal reaction. That is, if they even allowed the Falcon to land on-world. If Hux gave the order….

The room fell away as the icy terrain of Ilum appeared. He had allowed his mind to wander, and he would pay the price for it. Hux held a gun to Rey’s head. Her eyes were not on the general, however, they were on him. First, angry and accusing, then pleading with him to save her. He did nothing; he knew how this worked—he knew there was nothing he could do. His mind would conjure his deepest fears; he would watch her die.

Somewhere his rational mind knew it wasn’t real, but it mattered little when he experienced every sensation as if it were. He knew he would never forget the details of her death, would obsess over them in the dark hours of the night; this frustratingly authentic memory would ignite the fear he carried with him. He steadied himself for the inevitability, grateful that this moment would not be added to her own memories of suffering.

Hux turned, considering him for a moment before throwing her face-first into the snow. His
foolish, foolish mind had wandered and changed the illusion again. Hux grasped her by her hair and lowered himself on top of her, pinning her underneath him. The words he whispered to her were vile and nauseating, but Kylo had heard the words before; in her memories of the thugs of Jakku. He knew what Sidious’s version of Hux would do to her.

Again, he prepared himself. Stepping in would only escalate the illusion until he lost all rational thought. His stomach rolled with what he would be forced to endure, but he took comfort in the fact that she wouldn’t. This wasn’t Rey. Rey was a fighter; she would have sliced Hux’s face open long before he could try anything. It was easy to separate himself from the illusion, because he knew the strength of her powers. She would never allow….

The illusion changed again: this time Rey turned underneath Hux as he transformed into Poe Dameron. She wrapped her arms around his back, meeting his advances. It incited something possessive in Kylo to see her touch someone else, but he preferred it over the alternative. As Dameron trailed kisses down her neck, she murmured sweetly, “I am loyal to you, Poe.”

Kylo broke away from the hold that the illusion held over him and screamed at the heavens, “I don’t care, Sidious! I don’t care!” The illusion began stuttering back and forth between Dameron and Hux. The flashing illusion stood and pointed the blaster at her in challenge. When Kylo didn’t react, the illusion pulled the trigger on the blaster, exploding a beam of plasma into her head.

Rey was instantly motionless, the snow tainted crimson around her. Refusing to look at her, he focused and shouted, “I don’t care what you do, because I know the truth! This isn’t real! Nothing you do will change that!” He shoved against the foreign energy in his head, throwing together barriers he hadn’t used in years, shutting himself completely from the darkness in the process. A brightness overtook his senses, and he fell backward.

He opened his eyes, breathing heavily, and found himself collapsed in *Force Destiny*. Kylo knew that if he didn’t destroy the machine, he risked the chance of Sidious’s return. But if he destroyed it, then Rey would be alone with a monster in her head… a different monster in her head. With the power of the crystals on Ilum, Sidious could easily find his way in again—if the stormtroopers there didn’t capture her first. He was left with an impossible choice, but it was a different type of conflict than he had felt before.

The connection with Rey was closed, but Sidious and the darkness were gone from their bond. Painfully bright, overwhelming light seeped into the emptiness the darkness had left behind. He knew he couldn’t keep Sidious and the darkness at bay forever, but something had changed. His mind was clearer than it had felt in years.
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Imagined violence against, injury to, and witnessed death of several major characters during torture

Non-fatal injuries are sustained by Kylo Ren from a fist and a lightsaber

Non-fatal injuries are sustained by Finn
Admission

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
"Ben! Come back!" Rey gasped, and her eyes shot open. Blinking rapidly as the ceiling of the Millennium Falcon came into focus. A pair of hands helped her sit up, and she turned to find her friend. "Rose?"

Before she could ask more, Rose wrapped her in a tight embrace. "Oh, Rey, thank the Force you're okay."

Rey remembered her confrontation with Sidious...and Kylo. She remembered the words that forever changed her life – It was you. She remembered the darkness and the horrific images that had overwhelmed her mind. She remembered the illusion; her mind achingly replayed the moment her bondmate killed her best friend and the moment she killed her bondmate. She remembered holding them, sobbing over their lifeless bodies, when she was startled awake. "It was just a nightmare," she said, trying to convince herself as much as her friend.

Rose was quiet for a moment, a war of emotions in her eyes. It was just a nightmare, wasn't it? Rey had the immediate urge to take stock of her surroundings. They were in the crew quarters, where she had been before she allowed the darkness in again. If it had all been a dream, the room would have looked as she left it. But there was... blood on the floor. It was mostly droplets, but there was a larger puddle next to where she was sitting. Dread settled heavily in her chest. Rey jumped to her feet.

"Rey, are you –"

The words were lost as Rey noticed more blood throughout the room. Something terrible had happened; she could almost sense the pain in the energy around her. She could almost hear the desperate shouts. Then she noticed blood streaks by the blastdoor, leading to a body slumped by a bunk. It hadn't been a nightmare. It may have been an illusion, but the consequences were very real. She was at his side, turning him over as the first tear fell.

“Finn!” she cried. His eyes were not open – staring blankly – as they had been in the illusion, but the absence of his bright, kind stare was just as alarming. She shook him desperately, but he was unresponsive.

It reminded her of the moment after finding him in the snow on Starkiller. After everything they had been through, was her bondmate responsible again? If Kylo had done this, it was her fault. She had been distracted by darkness, she hadn’t been there to protect her friends. The only comfort was the sound of his pulse in the Force. Finn was still alive. For how long, she was uncertain. “I don’t
understand! It wasn’t real!” She turned to her friend. “Tell me Ben didn’t do this.”

Rose knelt next to them. “Well, he was here… and you were fighting… and Finn heard… and...” Her words trailed off as she vaguely gestured to Finn.

“Rose, please, tell me Ben didn’t do this.”

Rose only sighed and rested her hand on Rey’s shoulder. Rey was panicking, but Rose was eerily calm. Her fiancé was unconscious, unresponsive and she was comforting Rey. It didn't make sense. How could he have done this? Had Kylo chosen to join Sidious's Dark Army after all? Had Sidious been distracting her with an illusion while Kylo executed his attack?

*I must do this,* he had told her. *Think what you want of me, but I can’t risk them finding you.*

Her mind flashed back to his face when he had said those words. It was *sorrow,* not anger. Even after he had learned of the secrets she had withheld from him, his only reason for joining Sidious had been to protect her. Even at his most desperate moment, he hadn’t gone through with it. Rey *knew* him. He wouldn't join that monster. He had hurt her with the secrets he kept from her, but she *knew* him, Rose had to be wrong. “Ben… *My Ben* did this?”

Rose stared at her with an odd expression on her face, as if she couldn’t understand why it would upset her. He was only their enemy to Rose, she supposed. How could she possibly understand Rey’s complicated feelings for him? It didn’t matter. None of that changed the absence of a denial from her friend. Kylo *had* done this.

Or had he?

Rey knew she was excellent at grasping onto denial, but she couldn’t let go of her belief that Kylo – despite all his faults – was inherently *good.* He wouldn’t do this. In that certainty, there were two revelations. First, Rey finally admitted to herself that despite Sidious’s attempts, their fight hadn’t changed her love for Kylo. She was disappointed, she wanted answers, but she still had hope in him. She still knew who he was, even if she didn’t know why he had done what he did.

Second, in her understanding that he wouldn’t do this, she understood who did. Her thoughts slipped back to their fight on Mustafar. Kylo had held the blade to her throat, but someone far more nefarious was behind those actions. Rey thought her nightmare—taking his life—was her greatest fear. But in pushing him away, she had done something far worse to him. After discovering the
truth about her parents, she had let the darkness in, and hadn’t seen the consequences for what they were. She had allowed Sidious in. If he had access to her mind... he had access to Kylo’s mind too. “What have I done?” she cried. “This is all my fault. I shut him out, and now he's lost in darkness. That monster won’t stop until he kills my family! And he’ll make Kylo do it! I can’t let him do this, but it will kill me to stop him. I shouldn’t have left him alone while I—"

“Woah, woah, woah, Rey, breathe. What are you talking about? No one’s killing anyone. Finn's fine; I checked.,” Rose assured her as she stood. Rey tried to catch her breath as the fear shuddered through her, but she couldn’t stop her mind from devolving into thoughts of worst-case scenarios. Only when Rose’s shadow blocked the light cast on Finn’s reposed features did her focus shift back to her friend. “Finn’s just asleep,” Rose said. “He came in when you were...not yourself... and punched Ben in the face, so Ben used the Force on him.” Her friend offered her a hand, and Rey allowed her to pull her to her feet. “Let's go get you some tea…. and talk.” With that, Rose turned and left the crew quarters.

"What about Finn?" Rey called as she stumbled after her.

Rose waved her off. "He'll be fine."

That wasn't a good enough explanation for Rey. Kylo had been there. Evidently, there had been a fight, because Finn had struck her bondmate in the face. Her hope bloomed brighter that Kylo hadn't killed Finn when he easily could have, especially when she wasn't... "What did you mean 'not myself'?

Rose glanced at her for a moment at the entrance of the galley, then made her way to one of the sliding cabinets. “Ben said it was 'darkness,' but it looked to me like mind control.” Rey had feared Kylo’s darkness, feared losing him to Sidious’s control, but the entire time, she should have been fearing herself. After the revelation that she had killed her parents, she should have realized it sooner. The true threat to the bond and her friends had always been her.

"What did I do?" Her friend knelt as she rummaged through a cabinet, intent on ignoring her. "Rose," Rey said louder, grabbing her friend by the arm to redirect her attention. "Please... what did I do?"

Her friend was clearly weighing the risks of telling her the truth, which only served to heighten her anxiety. “You took his lightsaber,” Rose answered, eyes filled with sympathy, “you tried to... hurt him. He locked us in the corridor, to protect us, but when I broke back in, you were choking him. I had to tackle you. Then he did something in your mind, and it fixed you.”
Kylo had helped her... after discovering the secrets she had kept from him. Not only had he not joined Sidious, but he had risked his life to protect her and her friends from him. She was still angry with her bondmate, but it was difficult to maintain after witnessing the carnage in that room. "Where is he? Did I hurt him?"

Rose grabbed a container from the cabinet and set it on the counter. There was something her friend wasn't telling her. Panic tightened in her chest as Rose calmly set the water to boil. “He seemed fine, Rey,” she said with a shrug, as if they were talking about nothing of consequence. “He was more concerned about you and the—"

"Then why is there all that blood!"

Rose still wouldn't turn to look at her. "Finn did punch Ben in the face...."

"Did... I... Hurt... Him?" Rey could feel the darkness begging entry again. She knew what lurked there. Her bondmate wasn't a threat to the Resistance. She was. It only solidified her decision that, once she finished on Ilum, she couldn't return to Dantooine.

Rose finally turned with a sigh. "Most of that blood really was from his face," she said, prefacing what Rey knew was likely something she wouldn't want to hear. "He also had a small wound on his side from the lightsaber."

Rey was livid, but she had no one to direct it toward. She knew his injury was her fault, but she was angry that he had risked his own life to intervene. She couldn't soften the growl that rumbled low in her chest. "How small?"

"It was mostly a burn on his side, but I fixed it," Rose assured her, turning back to the counter in search of a cup. "A couple of hours with the Bacta patch, and he'll be good as new."

Her anger faded to guilt as she imagined what he felt when she stole his lightsaber and wounded him again. He must have believed she did it in hatred. He must have believed she wanted to kill him. Again. He must hate her. The part that surprised her the most was that Kylo had allowed her friend to touch him. He didn't allow anyone to touch him. "He let you heal him?"

"Yeah," Rose said as she leaned up on her toes to reach the cups. "He was distracted with what was happening to you." It would have mattered more to Rey that he was worried about her if she wasn't so fixated on what she had done. She couldn't shake the images of the illusion, or the bloody room.
"Are you sure I didn't hurt him?" she asked softly. Her voice sounded wearier than the anxiousness vibrating inside her. "If he locked you out, maybe you didn't see another wound." Her mind unhelpfully reminded her of his injuries after Concordia. "There was so much blood."

"He was fine, Rey," Rose assured her again, pouring the boiling water into the two cups. The steam billowed into the air until it visibly disappeared, though she could still sense it in the Force. It was as gone as much as Sidious was. Rose wanted Rey to believe everything was okay, but something terrifying existed in the shadows that Rose couldn't see. They weren't safe as long as that creature existed.

Rose turned to study her as silence filled the room. She must have seen the agitation in her expression, because she added, "Finn did a number on his face, and his nose was bleeding from being choked with the Force. He wasn't worried about it; I got the impression he had suffered those injuries before."

Rose turned back to cups, and Rey stared at her friend's back as she whispered, "Not by me."

"Well, I mean, you did slice his face open that one time," Rose reminded her as she sprinkled leaves in the steaming cups.

Rey knew her friend meant it as a joke, but the sorrow bubbled up in her throat anyway. "I could have done it again. I could have done worse. I could have killed him!" she said. "He shouldn't have been there."

With her back to Rey, Rose stirred the leaves in the cup. Her movements were passive and even. She had watched her fiancé fight the Supreme Leader of the First Order, she had watched Rey almost kill him, she tended to the wound of their enemy, and yet, she was disturbingly calm. Despite the events she had witnessed, her voice was just as composed as she looked, "You weren't waking up; he came to help you."

"And he could have died! I didn't need his help!" Rey knew she was lashing out in anger, but she didn’t know what to do with this overwhelming helplessness she felt, this loss of control. Facing her own death never concerned her, but facing the thought of losing the ones she loved… it was terrifying. It was every reason why she should have never allowed anyone in. There was no solution, no way to help, no one to fight, to protect them. There was nothing she could do against this threat.
Rey tried to gasp for calming breaths, but it wasn’t helping. She felt the grounding hands of her friend grip her arms as she guided her back to a seat. Rey didn’t watch Rose as she finished with the cups of tea, or as she crossed the space between them, or as she knelt before her.

"Maybe you did need his, Rey," Rose said gently, extending the cup. Rey took it with a forced smile as she waited for her friend to elaborate. "He said Sidious was controlling you. Whatever he did helped you, because when he disappeared, you woke up."

Rey wasn't particularly thirsty, she wasn’t particularly anything, but she took a sip of tea as Rose's words settled between them. **Sidious was controlling you.** Kylo had trusted her friend with far more than just treating his wound. "You know?"

Rose nodded. "Why did you keep this from us?"

"Because I didn't want anyone to know about my darkness!"

The silence stretched as her words revealed the wall she had long ago built between them. Rose didn't look angry that she had kept those secrets from them. Her eyes were brimming with something else, something Rey didn't expect. "We could have helped you, Rey; *Ben* could have helped you sooner."

It was something she had always wanted—this closeness and understanding with other people—but Rey didn't know what to do with what she was feeling. She didn't know what to do with the fact that Rose wasn't running in the other direction after she had seen Rey at her worst. She didn't know what to do with the fact that Kylo knew she kept terrible secrets from him, and still came back for her. "I don't understand, why did he help me? Sidious destroyed everything between us."

"I don't think Sidious has that kind of power," Rose said—too casually—as she sipped her tea. "Ben told me about the secrets you kept from each other. He was more concerned with helping you."

"And..."

"And I don't agree with him not telling you; it was wrong." Rose swirled the tea in her cup as she contemplated saying more, and Rey could see the indecision on her face. Though she didn't like what her friend had to say, she was grateful she continued. "But he did it for the right reasons, Rey. And that’s what I think matters most when everything is so complicated – intention. He *could* have
killed us all if he wanted, but he is not making decisions as Supreme Leader of the First Order. He was trying to help all of us and feared you wouldn't trust him."

"What about what I did?" Rey said, refusing to meet her friend's gaze. "Did he tell you the secret about my parents?"

Rose set her cup on the table. "No, Rey, it wasn't like that. He told me about Sidious, because he was concerned about you. And he told me who killed that monster. And why."

"That's probably because he knew you would all hate me if you knew about my darkness," Rey scoffed. Part of her knew that it was safer to focus on her anger rather than face what she had done and its implications. She didn't care.

"No, Rey, we wouldn't," Rose said, reaching forward to take Rey's hand, "but I'd like it if you would tell me. I want to be someone you can trust with anything."

"You won't want to be if you find out what I did to my parents," she whispered.

Rose shook her head, but Rey knew. No one would ever see her the same when they knew what she had done. She would never see herself the same. Her friend, however, was adamant in her ignorance. "I promise, Rey, nothing you say will change my mind about you."

The worlds slipped through her lips before she could catch them. "I killed them."

Her friend dropped Rey's hand in shock. She waited for the horror...or disgust...or fear that Rey would have felt—that she had felt toward her bondmate. When Rose spoke, however, it was far softer than she had anticipated. "Your parents?" Rey could barely find the strength to nod and confirm the unforgivable sin she had committed. She steeled herself for the hatred that would end a friendship, but the emotion she did see was unexpected. "I'm sorry," Rose said, "I'm not trying to make this worse, but I'm confused. How was that a secret he knew but you didn't?"

"I don't remember it," Rey whispered, and the cup of tea suddenly felt cold in her hand. She stood, trying to decide what to do with her body as much as her emotions. Rose stood as well, moving aside to give her space. Rey knew if she tried to escape, Rose would let her. That small gesture gave her the courage to continue. "I had a bond through the Force with Ben that I don't remember. He helped me through lonely nights long before my parents abandoned me. They were drunks who brought me to Jakku because they were scared of my powers. And when they left, I was angry and
blew up their ship with the Force. Then I made myself forget.

“I forgot what I did, I forgot them, and I forgot Ben. He knows because the Force showed him a vision when we touched hands. He knew what I did even before I went to him on the Supremacy. He never told me, but when I found out they were dead, he let me believe he did it. And I almost killed him for it.” A flash of his pained eyes the night she held his own lightsaber to his throat replayed in her mind. It was an expression she imagined Rose had seen as Rey tried to use his lightsaber against him again in her darkness. Each shuddering breath was difficult as she struggled under the weight of what she had done. “Since I left Jakku, I’ve been trying to understand who I am, why I have these powers, what my place is in this war. Somehow, I knew my parents were the key. I was certain the answer was in who they were. I imagined they were powerful Jedi. But the answer was in how they died; a secret that only my enemy knew. I have no family legacy; they were nobody. The man I called a monster didn’t kill my family; I did. I’m more lost now than when I started this. I don't want to know who I am anymore, Rose. ”

Rey watched her friend intently as a flurry of emotions passed over her features. The silence stretched between them. "Well?" she asked in impatience as the first tears fell. "Do you still believe what you said?

She nearly dropped her tea as Rose wrapped her in an embrace, both from the force of it and the unexpectedness. "I'm sorry, Rey," Rose murmured, "that was a lot to sort through, but of course I still want to be here for you. And before I say anything else, you need to know it was an accident. You were a child; no one could blame you for what happened. I know it’s hard to believe me, and easy to blame yourself, but if anyone ever deserved your forgiveness, Rey, it’s you. What you did in the past isn’t who you are now, and that’s at the core of forgiveness."

Rey couldn't comfortably lay her head on her friend's shoulder because of the height difference, so she cried into her hair instead. Rose didn't mind, she only squeezed tighter. "Thank you for telling me. I'm starting to understand you and your relationship with Ben better now. This bond—you've had it your entire lives?"

The guilt dropped heavily in her stomach. She had been given the most beautiful gift by the Force, but she had destroyed it like she destroyed everything else. She was the only reason she had been lonely for most of her life. She was the reason she was lonely now. Worst of all, she was the reason for his loneliness. Her mind unhelpfully replayed his painful memories as he fell to darkness. Alone. "But I forgot him, Rose, I wasn't there for him when he needed me,” she lamented. “I'm the reason he fell."

"I doubt that very much, Rey. I think we both know there were many reasons why Ben fell, but in the end, he made the decisions that condemned him to that side of the war. Nothing you could have done or not done would have prevented that. You’re not responsible for other people’s choices. You couldn’t have stopped him from falling any more than you could have stopped your parents
from leaving," Rose said. It hurt. It hurt to believe that everything was out of her control, that she always had been and always would be powerless to help him.

"Does Ben blame you?" her friend asked, snapping her from her thoughts. Rey hadn't stopped to think about how her bondmate felt about it. She knew their bond had meant something to him once, she knew it had given him hope. After all, though she had forgotten him, he had never forgotten her. He had suspected who she was when she had appeared before him in the rain. He had searched her mind for memories when they first met on Takodana. The Force had shown him the truth – he knew she had erased him from her memories – but he had carried that secret with him since Ahch-To... to protect her. Even when she had nothing but cruel to him, Ben had never once blamed her for forgetting him, let alone for abandoning him when he needed hope. If he held any hatred for her, it stemmed from choices she had made since they found each other again, not in the past.

"No," she realized, "he doesn't."

"Then if Ben has forgiven you, maybe it’s time to forgive yourself," Rose said softly. Rose was just trying to help, but she didn’t know Kylo. He had turned his back on his own family, because he refused to forgive them. He had no reason to forgive her, especially not after all she had done. As she imagined a galaxy where he could forgive her, she found that she didn’t want him to. After all that the people who loved him had sacrificed to bring him home, she didn’t deserve his forgiveness. The worst part about Kylo lying to her was that he had done it to prevent her from discovering the terrible person she was.

"Why would he come back for me when he knew what I did to my parents?" she choked through her tears. "Why didn't he tell me? He should have told me when I went to him on the Supremacy, when he tried to convince me to join him. But he didn't! He forced me to admit my parents were nobody, but he didn't tell me the truth about what I had done to them! And then when I thought he had been responsible, he let me believe it! I almost killed him! How could he do that?" Her entire galaxy was falling apart around her. Rose held her close, not bothered at all that she was crying into her hair.

Finally, her friend whispered, "Did he tell you why he kept it from you?"

"He said he was afraid! He didn't think I would believe him, and he was afraid of what it would do to me," she answered, pausing to control her shuddering breath. "And because I didn't 'want' to remember, he didn't think it was his story to tell. He said he wanted to protect me, but he should have told me, so he could have protected himself from me. In the throne room, I feared his darkness, but he should have feared mine..." Rey pushed away from her friend, lifting her tea to her lips with shaking fingers. The cup had lost most of its contents since she last took a sip. Evidently, she had spilled it at some point during their embrace.
"I'm not going to say what he did was right or wrong," Rose said, giving her the space she needed, "But however you found out, it must have been a horrible shock. I can't imagine how that makes you feel to learn something that made you doubt who you are like this. But, Rey, do you actually believe Ben could fear your darkness? He knows it better than anyone. He knows you better than anyone."

It was just another reminder that she had shut everyone out, that all she had ever done was hurt people. Rey felt vulnerable and broken. She was proving to Rose and everyone else that they would be right to leave her, that she didn't deserve their love. Kylo may have been the only one person who truly understood her, but she didn't deserve him either. "I called him a monster, but I'm the monster, Rose." Rey couldn't take it anymore. Setting her tea on the counter, she fled from the galley.

"You're not a monster," Rose said, storming after her. "Is this about your parents? It was an accident!"

"I don't know if it was an accident!" Rey refused to turn around to look at her friend. She focused her sights on the crew quarters. "They were my parents, Rose. They traded me for drinking money, and I had to survive on my own for over a decade, waiting there for them, because I made myself forget. I hate them. The worst part is, I'm not sad they're dead, and I'm not angry that I did it. That is why Luke wouldn't teach me, that is how Sidious found me, that is why I’ve hurt Kylo more times than I can count: because I have too much darkness inside me. If not a monster, what kind of person does that make me?" Rey stopped just inside the door as she re-examined the blood-stained floor.

"Human," Rose said softly. "Listen, I can't believe I'm standing here defending the Supreme Leader of the most evil organization in the galaxy, but you were right about him. He is not the monster we all thought he was. He gave Maz the coordinates to the Dantooine base..."

Rey pivoted to study her friend’s expression for the veracity of her words before she continued into the room. Ben gave Maz the coordinates?

"... he made sure the Resistance got there undetected; he killed the creature he served to save you. He fears so much for your safety that I believe the only reason he is still with the First Order is to protect you from them. Is he the monster we all thought he was?"

"No," Rey said distantly as she stood over the puddle of blood next to where she had awoken.
When Rose spoke again, Rey forced herself not to turn. "Then how can you condemn yourself, but believe Ben can be saved after everything terrible we both know he's done? You saw the good in him; why can't you see the good we see in you?"

"Even if Ben is changing, can't you see? So am I," Rey whispered. She bent down to run her fingers through the congealing blood. It made the consequences of their bond all the more real. She had darkness—darkness she had been foolish to believe she could control on her own. Sidious could not only influence her through the darkness but control her at will. Her darkness had been what allowed that creature back inside her bondmate's mind. The sticky blood on her fingers was proof that she could kill him. He wasn’t safe, because of her, and there was nothing Rose could say to change that. "He's not like Revan," she whispered to her friend as much as she did herself. "I am. I almost killed him. I have to push him away, or I'm going to drag him down with me. He'll fall, either by my darkness, or by my blade. I saw it in a vision."

Rey tilted her head to study her friend’s expression, expecting horror. Judging by the pinch in her brow, Rose found Rey's newfound realization more disturbing than terrifying. Rey couldn't explain to Rose what it had taken weeks to understand. Unable to stare at the blood – her bondmate’s blood – any longer, she stood in search of the vibromop. Her friend, however, wouldn't let the conversation die. "I don't know who Revan is or anything about visions, but... Ben can help you, I know he wants to. I don't know much about the Force, but we all want to be here for you, Rey, even if it's just to talk."

Rey sighed when she reached the storage compartment. "I don't deserve you as a friend. I don't deserve anyone."

“I get it, you don’t trust me yet, and that’s okay – ”

Rey shook her head in frustration. “That’s not it at all.”

“ – But if not me, or Finn, maybe talk to Ben?" Rose pressed from her position by the door. "The big laserbrain thinks you hate him, and you think his obvious feelings for you have changed after fighting Sidious in your head. You both are meant for each other, because you can't see the truth right in front of you."

The only truth I couldn’t see was the truth about who I am.

"Well, there's a good reason he thinks I hate him," Rey said, turning to her friend. "I said horrible things to him, because I'm a horrible person who hurts the people I love most." Refusing to acknowledge the disapproving scowl on her friend's face, Rey dragged the vibromop from the storage cabinet. Her eyes focused on her mission as she crossed the room to the puddle. When she pressed the button to spray the cleaning solution onto the floor, she thought Rose would accept it.
as a sign the conversation was over and leave her alone. Rey began to drag the vibrating device through the crimson puddle, but quickly realized her friend was intent upon continuing the argument.

"Even I can see that the reason you were so angry he kept secrets from you...is because you love him," Rose said over the whirring sound of the vibromop. "If Ben would open his eyes, he'd see it, too. And if you'd open your eyes, you'd see that he can help you fight the darkness; he knows it better than anyone. I know his love could help save you, and I truly hope your love can help save him, too. I hope that your love can save us all. I meant what I said: that's how we'll win the war. You're not dragging him deeper in darkness, no matter what you think is inside you; you're the only light guiding him out. Giving up on yourself means giving up on him, too."

It was so easy for Rose to speak about love, but people easily loved her. It wasn’t like that for Rey. Maybe Finn and Rose loved her, but it was different. They loved who they thought she was – the last Jedi. No one had ever loved the real Rey, especially not the only person who truly knew her. He could never love someone with her darkness. She would never be good enough to be loved, but that wasn’t her greatest fear. What if she wasn’t good enough to save him? Rey shook her head, biting back tears. "What if my darkness prevents him from turning?" She could feel her friend moving in the Force behind her. Gripping onto the handle as if it were a lifeline, Rey clenched her eyes shut so her friend wouldn't see the torment in them.

"I believe he is capable of turning, Rey," Rose said, resting a supportive hand on her shoulder. "But you need to understand; your worth is not tied to his choices. You are good, no matter what. In the end, if he can’t save himself, it's not your darkness that'll prevent that, Rey—it's his." Everything Rose told her was the truth, she was only repeating what Rey already knew. Somewhere under the darkness, Rey understood that - she wasn't arguing with Rose as much as she was arguing with her own darkness.

Sliding her shoulder out from under her friend's palm, Rey focused on wiping the blood from the floor again. As she worked, she felt her friend's eyes follow her movements, but Rose allowed her to continue in silence. When the weight of her words was finally too heavy, Rey gave Rose what she was waiting for. "All I've wanted since I saw the real Ben was to save him. If he doesn't need me, then what use am I to our bond?"

“What ‘use’ are you?” Rose said slowly. “Why would you think your only value is what people would want from you? Did Ben...” Rey was immediately defensive, prepared to defend Ben from whatever Rose believed he had done. Even though he was on the opposite side of the war, he had never asked anything of her other than ruling by his side. He was the only person who didn’t have unrealistic expectations of her. But she had learned early that people would let her die alone in the desert unless she proved her worth to them. Due in part to her Force derived instincts, she had proved proficient at scavenging in the most dangerous of wrecks.
After she left Jakku, she learned quickly that her worth was tied to what she could do for the Resistance. First, she had believed she could prove her value persuading Luke to return to the Resistance. When she had failed, she had convinced herself that bringing Kylo home would have proved her worth to them. The only problem was, he was far more than the prodigal son of the Skywalker bloodline to her. She could neither eliminate him like they wanted, nor did she have the capability of bringing him back. But if he didn’t need her light, her hope, what value did she bring their bond? With her darkness, he was better off without her. With her darkness, the Resistance was better off without her too. Rose studied her carefully, starting to understand exactly what world Rey had escaped from.

“You know that even if you decided not to become a Jedi and left the Resistance, Finn and I would still love you, right?”

Rey stopped mopping at those words and turned to read the vulnerable emotions on Rose's face. “Even if I fail?” she asked, unable to control the hope in her voice.

“We believe in you, Rey,” she replied with a soft smile, “but we would still love you, even without your powers. We love you for who you are, not what you can do for us. You know that, right?”

Rey glanced away. It was different for her than it was for them. From the moment she had escaped off of Jakku with the droid, everything had revolved around saving the Resistance. It wasn’t a path she had particularly chosen, but she had felt a responsibility to the people she met along the way. But for them it was… it was…

What was it?

She thought of Finn’s bond with Poe, then her, then Han, then Rose. Was this a path he had particularly chosen? Was it the path any of them had chosen? The more she considered it, the more she realized that perhaps they weren’t unlike her. Poe, Leia, Rose… none of them had chosen this. It was where their paths had led them. Maybe the beauty of the Resistance wasn’t in the organization itself as much as it was in the idea behind it. Maybe it was more than just hope in the face of galactic turmoil. Maybe it had started for them the same way it had started for her – fighting for the people next to them. Maybe she was more than just the last Jedi to them. Maybe that was what Rose meant when she said they would win the war by saving what they love.

“Rey?” her friend murmured, “what use is Ben to your bond?” It hurt to imagine that Kylo had to prove his value to her. Rey had learned from his memories that Sidious had convinced him that his “usefulness” was the only reason anyone had ever wanted him. She remembered when Kylo had believed she only wanted him for what he could do to save her friends. Had she been as blind with the intentions of her little family as Kylo had been with her?
“It’s not like that for me, I just…” she paused, shrugging. “I just love him. That’s it.”

“Good,” Rose said with a nod. “That’s how I feel about Finn. And, that’s how we feel about you. Though it’s a different kind of love, it’s just as strong.”

“It’s so hard,” Rey whispered. Closing her eyes, she forced away the shadows prying at her thoughts. The pain was sharp and acute in the absence of the soothing numbness of darkness. “You and Finn make it look so easy.”

“To be fair, Finn and I are not on opposite sides of a war. It'll be different when Ben's by your side. You'll argue over dumb things like his taste in holobooks, or how loud he snores when he sleeps on his stomach, instead of—well, you know—” That elicited a small laugh from Rey as she imagined someone like Kylo snoring, until she finished the sentence in her mind: *Ben belonging to an evil organization that's trying to kill you and your friends.* Rose must have recognized the path her thoughts had taken, because she smiled gently, and continued, “Love hasn’t been… easy. I don’t think it’s supposed to be. Good things in life rarely are, in my experience.”

As Rose’s fingers wrapped around her hand, Rey found her own small smile. “Listen,” her friend said, “right after I woke up on Barkhesh, Finn refused to speak with me about what happened between us. I assumed he didn't love me, and he was too scared of being in love to tell me how he felt. He wasn't the best at communicating, and once I understood that he grew up with no one to teach him how, I didn't blame him. But early on, I didn't understand. I saw glimpses of the love he had for you since the moment we first met. He attempted to desert the Raddus to lead you away from the Resistance as the First Order closed in. On our adventure together, you were always on his mind; his entire life seemed to revolve around you—and, in a way, it did.”

Rose used the shock Rey felt to her advantage as the words settled between them. She gently took the vibromop from Rey’s hands and focused on the mess she had abandoned in her distraction. “You were the only family he had,” Rose continued. “You had this incredible connection from the moment you first met, but I didn't see it that way. I just saw his constant worry over you. On Crait, he nearly sacrificed his life for the Resistance. He finally had people other than you to fight for, and I thought his love for you was changing. But even when we were safe on Barkhesh, you were his main concern and I … envied his love for you. I felt like I could never compete with you for his heart.”

It had never occurred to Rey how others would see her friendship with Finn. Rey had always assumed love would be a simple thing. It was all anyone talked about. Civilizations went to war – lost wars – over love. It was just a feeling like happiness or anger or fear. Could it be that complicated for someone like Rose who *knew* what it felt like? Everything in this war had been so undeniably complicated, Rey assumed love would be *easy.* Simple. Effortless. And loving
Kylo was effortless, but being in love with him hadn’t been at all. It was terrifying in every way it could be.

Had Rose felt that too? Had beautiful, smart, fearless Rose feared that she wasn’t enough for Finn as Rey had feared she would never be enough for her bondmate? It was strange then, that Rey couldn’t think of a single person who she feared held Kylo’s heart. But her mind did unhelpfully supply the pain she felt in Kylo when she had kissed Poe… and when she had told him she loved Finn. Was it wishful thinking to wonder if he cared, as Rose had cared? Was he merely possessive of her loyalty, or was it something else? Before she could wander further down that path, Rose resumed her story. "We argued about it finally the night you first told me about Ben, when you kissed Poe to protect him. Finn was worried, and I finally found the nerve to say something. It wasn’t until he explained himself that I understood that we had different viewpoints because we have different backgrounds.

“I already had a family I was born into, but he was building his own. I feared living a life without people to love, and he feared living a life after losing them. Once we were honest about how we felt, I understood him. I learned that he had room in his heart for both of us, that his love for you was never a threat to me. It was a blessing. You are, and will always be, his family. I can’t imagine what my life would be like if I listened to the doubt in my head and never found the courage to just ask him. I’m grateful I finally understood, because I’d love to be part of your family, too.”

Rose smiled, and for once, Rey didn’t fear her friend’s assertions of love were pretty lies. “Rey, the point is, it could have caused a rift between us if I let my assumptions become the truth. If you love someone, you have to try to see the world through their eyes. Love is understanding someone on the deepest level. You may be on different sides, but I think you already have that understanding of Ben, because you believed in him when no one else did.”

"He understood me, too," she whispered, "better than I understood myself."

Her friend's smile widened. "See? You two have a connection that goes beyond anything I can understand. Trust in that, Rey. Trust in him. Trust in yourself. And trust in us too. We love you for you, Rey. Don't listen to the darkness."

"Thank you, Rose," she said, wishing it was as simple as not listening to the darkness. "You're such a good friend to me, even after I've caused problems for you and Finn."

"No, Rey, that wasn't the point, it was my own—"

"The point is you've always been good to me, but I haven't been a good friend to either of you."
Rey forced her eyes to meet the pair staring at her with forgiveness she didn't deserve. "I was so caught up in the Force and my own secrets that I kept you all at a distance, then wondered why I felt like an outsider. I could have been there for Finn like he's been there for me and told him to be honest with you. I could have explained to you that he was my first friend, the only person to come back for me, and has become my closest family. I could have been there for you both, but I wasn't. I've never had a family before, but I promise, I'll try harder." 

Rose wrapped Rey in another embrace, nearly knocking the vibromop from her hand. "I'd like for us to be close, and I know Finn would, too." Rey turned to stare at the corner of the room where her friend lay crumpled on the floor. A reminder of her vision flashed in her mind, but for now, he was safe. "Speaking of Finn, since he is...taking his rest shift, we should probably tell Chewie to get this thing back to base."

Rey pulled away from her friend. "Why are we turning back to the base?"

"Ben said the *Falcon* is not safe, and neither is Ilum."

Rey’s heart stuttered in shock. She remembered how desperate he had been in the nightmare. He had nearly joined Sidious in his desire to discover her location. Now he had it. What would he do? How could she protect him from the Resistance – and herself – if he tried to chase after her. "You told him about Ilum?"

Rose studied her in confusion. "You trust him, so I chose to trust him too, Rey."

“We have to go to Ilum,” Rey said, unable to contain the fear that wavered in her voice. Her mind raced as she imagined facing whatever Poe had planned in the upcoming weeks without a weapon. “I need that crystal, Rose.”

"I don't know, Rey, he seemed to think that Poe shouldn't have sent us there. He said the First Order—"

Rey shook her head, resolute. "No, he's worried about me taking the *Falcon*, but he was the one who gave the First Order our transponder codes in the first place. Once we reach Ilum, we'll be fine. Poe wouldn't send us to somewhere unsafe. He needs me in whatever plans he’s made to kill Ben. We're going to Ilum, I need this lightsaber."

“If this is what you need to do, then we'll do it,” Rose said, eying her carefully. “But after all of this
is over, we’re having a chat with your Force boyfriend. You’re both so similar, and it would be funny, if it weren’t hurting you both. You’re both idiots trying to protect each other… adorable idiots, really… but you’re just one talk away from solving a lot of your problems. And I say that with nothing but love.”

Rey smiled, her heart warmed by her friend’s words.
Rey huddled in the corner of her bunk, eyes swollen, cheeks stiff from dried tears. Rose’s words
were like sand slipping through her fingers as Rey sat alone, fighting the darkness that demanded entry. Sleep evaded her, her mind screamed for peace, and as she drifted in her dark purgatory, she was more certain than ever that the events she had seen in Kylo’s mind were true. She knew she forced herself to forget it all, because she felt that desire to forget again. The darkness gnawed away at her hope, dimming it. All she wanted was to be the woman she once believed she was, but that was impossible. Being a nobody was better than this. Kylo had lost hope when he had discovered he was related to a monster, but she had discovered that she was the monster.

It was strange; she first feared her connection with Kylo because she saw herself in him and feared becoming him. After she truly saw him for who he was, she had hope that their similarities and understanding would be a lifeline to help save him. She no longer feared becoming him. Now she feared becoming the very reason Ben Solo was lost for good. Maybe Rose and Finn would always be there for her, but they would never understand this, not like Kylo did. Rose made everything sound so simple, but it wasn’t. More than anything, she wanted to return to those moments under the stars and in the refresher and the storage and training rooms, she wanted the comfort and safety of their bond, she wanted him. Even if it wasn’t what she wanted to hear, she believed Kylo would know what to do. It would so easy to find him across the bond.

But she feared her darkness.

She could almost feel Sidious lurking, waiting for their bond to open another connection between them. She feared the darkness in ways she never had before. The longer she struggled to sleep, the further her thoughts spiraled. In her fear, she was convinced of one truth; their bond wasn’t safe.

If she shut him out, however, he would believe she did it out of hatred. He would believe she had intentionally tried to kill him because of the secrets Sidious revealed. Despite her initial impulsive reaction, she wasn’t angry at Kylo anymore, for any of it. She had no idea when he had given the others information about the Millennium Falcon, but after all he had done to protect her, she refused to believe it had been a recent divulgement. After her reaction to his knowledge of their whereabouts on Barkhesh, she understood why he had been hesitant to reveal that he had been the one to provide Maz with the coordinates to the new base. What mattered, in the end, was that he was trying to protect them.

The secret he withheld about her parents – it hurt, profoundly, especially because he knew what it was like to be blindsided by the truth about his family. But he had seen her after her fall into the cave of Ahch-To, he knew what it would do to her. When they were little more than enemies, he had made the choice to protect her from that pain. He had wanted her to join him, had wanted her to fall to darkness, but the good man in him hadn’t allowed it. He had rationalized it how he needed to at the time to himself, but deep down, Kylo had known the suffering it would cause. He knew she would fall to doubt and darkness, and he had tried to stop it. If she hadn’t been certain before that Ben Solo had always been in there, that painful choice proved it. She believed he had it in him to turn, and that their bond could be influential in his success. The only question was – would their bond be an asset in his turn or a hindrance.
Everyone was in danger and it was all her fault. Her fear and anger had allowed the darkness inside, and with the darkness… the greatest threat to the galaxy. Two of the strongest Force users in the war struggled with a darkness that left them vulnerable to a monster’s control and illusions. Their bond had not only been used against them, but nearly used to coerce one of them to surrender their freedom. She was under no delusion that a scenario could arise where she could become a target as well.

Sidious had them cornered. Rey knew they were stronger together. If she blocked Kylo out, it would be easier for the monster to exploit their weaknesses. But if she didn’t block Kylo out, Sidious would use the bond against them. At stake was not just their lives, but the entire galaxy. There was no easy answer. The fear of losing the ones she loved overshadowed her desires, but the pain of her loneliness was unbearable. The fear and uncertainty and loneliness made it far more difficult to shut the dark out now. She grasped onto the light with everything she had.

*Please,* she begged the Force. *I need your guidance.*

With her eyes clamped shut, hovering in a desperate world between wakefulness and sleep, it almost felt as if there was another energy in her room. It would have startled her, but there was no warning in the Force. The energy was warm and tender, lulling Rey into a temporary peace that cast her mind far away from her troubles. As she drifted into unconsciousness, she could almost feel phantom fingers gently graze her temple. For the first time since she had been pulled into that nightmare, she felt the briefest caress of peace.

The soft lapping of water soothed her further, but a familiar voice startled her awake. “Hey, kid.”

Rey’s eyes fluttered open, immediately focusing on the sight of a familiar lake. The water looked like glass under the moonlight. It would have been the perfect place to contemplate her troubles… if she was alone. She turned from its peaceful beauty, in search of the man belonging to that voice. When her eyes settled on Luke, her immediate reaction was rage.

“Where have you been?!” she demanded. His gentle smile faded and he rolled his eyes. Evidently, he had expected a different reaction. He grunted as he sat back, staring out at the lake. In her dreams, the blue hue was gone. He looked younger, much as he did in Kylo’s memories. It was almost easy to forget that he was dead, but there was one thing she couldn’t forget. “You found me right after you died and never came back to help me! I needed guidance!”

*You could have stopped me from making so many mistakes I can never take back.*

His face softened in understanding. “I couldn't, Rey,” he answered. “Your darkness wouldn't allow me in to…..”

“You mean Sidious's darkness?” Her voice was strained with bitterness and disappointment. She swiped at her cheeks as the pain caused by that monster returned in full force. If Luke had warned
her against Sidious instead of Kylo, would their bond have fallen into such a hopeless place?

Luke nodded, accepting her raging emotions in stride. The moonlight reflected in his melancholy eyes and she was under the very distinct impression that his thoughts were lingering somewhere in the past. “I lost my way,” he replied. “I fell for Darth Sidious’s lies just as my father had. I feared the darkness and I failed my own nephew. I lost them both, but I should have done more to help you. Instead of trying to protect you from Ben’s failures, and mine, I should have given you the knowledge to choose differently.”

Protect me from your failures? Too late, she thought bitterly, I tried to kill Ben too.

Luke eyed her with thinly veiled frustration. Evidently, he was privy to her thoughts, but he ultimately continued without rebuke. “There is nothing left I can tell you that you don't already know. I’m not here to be the mentor to you that I should have been from the beginning; it's too late for that.

Was it too late? Was her darkness too strong, her path already set? She refused to believe that Sidious had already won. “Then what are you here for?”

“I let fear control me, Rey,” he said with a sigh. “And now I sense your fear, I’m trying to help you not make the same mistakes I did.”

Rey could feel her connection to the dream falter as darkness devoured her rage. She knew she should grasp onto the light, but the galaxy was falling apart around her. She needed answers, not cryptic warnings. Luke knew nothing about fear. They had both faced trying to save a broken man from Sidious. Luke had wanted to save his father, certainly, but he didn’t know him, not as she had known Kylo in the throne room. That fear she had felt then wasn’t this hopelessness. Every single one of her terrible decisions had led to this moment and now she had no choice. If she didn’t shut out the bond, then Sidious would destroy them all. This was a fear that Luke couldn’t possibly comprehend; this was the fear of facing an impossible choice.

“We all have darkness Rey,” he told her, but Rey was certain he didn’t understand the darkness either. He had run from it – feared it. He didn’t know what it was like for his mind to clouded by fear and anger, to crave something he knew would numb it all if he only gave into it. He didn’t understand what it was like when the darkness convinced him that lies were the truth. He didn't understand how difficult it was to find the light again when he was lost in its depths. “We all make mistakes,” he said, but there was something broken in his voice. She knew the moment he was lost within – the moment he had been lost within since she met him – when the last thing he saw were the eyes of a frightened boy whose master had failed him. Maybe… maybe he did know fear, and maybe he did know darkness. Maybe he did know the agonizing decision she would have to make. Maybe that was what he was trying to tell her. His smile was pained and knowing. “This is beyond light versus darkness, or Resistance versus the First Order. All you can do is fight for what you believe is right; that’s the essence of a true Jedi.”
Rey knew what was right, but it hurt. She loved Kylo enough to let him go – to protect her from herself – but she had to know that he would be okay if she did. She refused to be responsible for nor inadvertently influence either his surrender to his former master nor his death. She turned from Luke as another wave of fear dragged her under, suffocating her under the weight of their impending destinies. No one could understand, no one but him.

I don’t know what to do, Ben, she cried out into the darkness of their bond, please, tell me what to do. What would you do?

Rey cried out for him as if her words had any hope of filling the yawning chasm that had grown between them, as if she said his name enough, then it would dull the ache of facing a tomorrow without him. It hurt to love him. She wanted to hear the comfort of his voice, more than anything, but knew the fate of the galaxy depended upon its absence. Her heart struggled to find the solution that would best protect him, but she knew it was purely out of selfishness. With a sigh, she searched for the right answer in the stillness of the lake. She shuddered as a soft breeze rippled over the water. No answers had arrived with the shifting winds, but the shiver was replaced by a cascading warmth of peace. The galaxy felt righted, her troubles solved, her soul repaired. The energy around her soothed her in a way no other energy could. Inhaling sharply, she turned.

Her gaze settled on her bondmate; he was no less beautiful than the water he was observing, but far more chaotic. The weight of the galaxy dragged him down like gravity, the war raged on in his mercurial energy, and the return of a monster stole the flickering hope in his eyes.

“Ben.”

His eyes would usually flick to hers in response to that name, pinning her under his heated, magnetizing gaze. She shivered in the absence of his stare. He hates me, she thought. It was almost enough to tear her from her dream, something inside her called for her to stay, to pay attention. Though it made sense that he refused to look at her, it was odd that he hadn’t reacted at all to her presence. His expression remained consistent as he stared out at the water, his energy never spiked with disgust or malice. It was almost as if she hadn’t spoken at all. “Ben?”

Nothing.

“Ben!” Rey shouted, but he stared past her as if she wasn’t there. Rey reached forward, palm prepared to shove against his chest. But her hand moved through him as if he was made of nothing but air. “What is this? Ben?” It made no sense. She felt his energy there with her, but it felt more like a dream than any dream they had shared. Why couldn’t she touch him? Had he done this?
“He can’t hear you,” Luke said next to her. “He’s in a deeper level of the Force.”

“A deeper level of the –” Meditation, she decided. Rey didn’t turn to confirm it with Luke. What was happening before her was far more important. Something in his behavior had changed. There was something else in his eyes now… fear.

“What are you doing here?” he asked and Rey thought he was speaking to her. Until someone else, someone unexpected, responded.

“Your light let me in,” Leia said. By the direction of Ben’s gaze, Rey assumed she was standing somewhere by the water, but she couldn’t see her. Was it real? Was Leia there with him? Or was this something else? “You’re doubting that I could find you through the Force?” she asked her son. “I am still your mother.”

He nodded, but his energy was withdrawing, building up defenses he had not used even when he was his most furious with her. “Ah, I must have forgotten all the times you came for me before,” he said flippantly, but his shining eyes belayed the pain hidden underneath. Rey had hope that this time his mother would see it for what it was.

Please, Leia, she begged. Please see him.

Rey waited. She waited for the words that would invariably spark a response, words that could build a bridge or burn one down, but Leia’s response did neither. “You know why we couldn’t come for you,” Leia said. Rey wished she could study the expression on Leia’s face to understand the meaning of her words. You abandoned him. Rey didn’t know why his parents never came for him, how would Kylo? Certainly, he had made his choice, but he thought it was the only one he had to make. Rey understood that all too well. “You were an adult,” his mother added gently, “and you didn’t want to be found.”

His words echoed her thoughts. “How did you know I didn’t want to be found?”

Leia’s response didn’t sound like the general she had come to know. Her words were so soft that Rey barely registered them. “You could have come home,” she said. “I laid awake every night hoping you would find your way back.”

Kylo released a shuddering breath as the first tear fell. “I couldn’t.”
“You didn’t think you could,” his mother replied. As silence fell between them, Rey wished she could reach out and thread her fingers with his to ease his pain. But maybe, just maybe, this was the right kind of pain. “I wish I would have done more to show you how much you were missed,” his mother continued. Rey’s own tears began to fall as Kylo bit back a sob.

See, Ben? You are missed. You are wanted. You are loved.

“But we couldn’t find you,” Leia said, her own voice heavy with emotion, “and I thought you wanted it that way. I never thought you would stay away for good. Remember when you ran away as a boy? You always came back. But the one time I ran after you – the night you cut open Snoke’s face – you panicked. You nearly killed everyone around you with the Force. Then you stole a speeder and ended up in jail. No one could ever force you to do anything and I feared what you would do if...” Her voice broke and her words were lost in the silence. Kylo’s face twisted in pain and his attention drifted away. Far away. Rey could nearly see the moments on that skyway replay in his tormented eyes. “Would you have come with us if we found you?”

Kylo’s stare dropped to his hands and he released a shaky breath. “I guess you had good reason not to come after me.”

“He knew what he was doing, Ben,” Leia said, her “no-nonsense” tone evident even through the emotion. “Your father and I – we both knew Snoke’s hold over you. I… felt your suffering through the Force. I left the bond open so I could feel your pain, every day, every minute that you were with Snoke. I put on a brave face – a mask – for the others, but I was there for you in the only way I could be. I felt the light left in you and had hope that one day you would come back. After you warned me about that bomb, I knew it was you, but I was in denial for some time that you were involved. When I finally accepted the truth, I didn’t go into hiding to draw out the Amaxine Warriors. Wherever I went, I had guards watching for you with stun guns in hope you would warn me again. After we defeated them, I thought the only way to save you – and the galaxy – was to destroy the First Order.”

“Your father…” she said with a fond chuckle, “he didn’t understand Snoke’s power like I did, he couldn’t feel his control. Han didn’t want to sit around and wait for you to fall into a trap. In our last fight before he left, we argued about him going after you. He went back into smuggling to earn enough credits to buy information about your location. When there was word that you were in the Unknown Regions, he knew his only chance was finding his stolen Falcon, because he was convinced it had the most complete navi-computer. Snoke had hidden you well; you weren’t anywhere in the known galaxy.

As the revelation settled between them, Rey studied her bondmate. His brows were furrowed and his eyes were focused in their study. She knew what Kylo was searching for – the truth. There was nothing in his expression to indicate that she had lied. They had searched for him. Rey wondered why Leia allowed Rey to believe they had abandoned their son. If Kylo would have stayed that
day, would his mother have told him the truth he so desperately needed to hear?

Why didn’t you tell me, Leia?

Kylo remained silent, so Leia continued, “I didn’t know in what capacity you served that beast until your father saw you kidnap Rey on Takodana. That hit him so hard. We always believed that Snoke held you prisoner, and in many ways he did, but I don’t think he was prepared to see you dressed, well, like your grandfather. He knew how difficult it was to save someone he loved from darkness, and he doubted he was good enough to help you, but he still tried to bring you home, Ben. He would have never left Starkiller alive, not after he knew you were there. He had set explosives to destroy it, but I know he would have never left without you. He would have made certain the others were safe, but he would have rather died than been the cause of your death. You know that, don’t you?”

Kylo didn’t immediately respond, but Rey wasn’t certain he could. He needed to hear that his parents loved him – wanted him – but it didn’t change the past. The death of his father already tormented him. What would this do to him? Lips trembling, Kylo sucked in a breath before he found the strength to give life to his broken words. “It doesn’t change anything,” he said, “it’s too late.”

“And that’s all my fault, Ben.”

He shook his head. “It’s your brother’s fault,” he sneered through his teeth.

“But I had a chance to bring you home, and I didn’t,” she said. “I never told anyone this, not even your father. It would have hurt him too much. Only Lando knows. The day it happened – I left the Senate building early, because I felt fear from you in the Force that I had never felt before. Then nothing. I trusted Luke to keep you safe, but I couldn’t feel anything from him either. Something hadn’t felt right in a while. I had written you a letter about your grandfather and hadn’t heard back from you. It was only confirmation of my worst fears. I sat through two hours of arguments between the Centrists and Populists before I couldn’t take it anymore. I was walking to my apartment on Hosnian Prime, prepared to charter a ship, call your father and find you. Then I received a holocall from Lando. I knew it had something to do with you. He assured me you were okay, but told me something happened between you and Luke and asked me what I wanted to do. He would have brought you back to me if I asked…”

Leia’s last words were whispered before a heavy silence fell between them. Fresh tears cut down his cheek, but Kylo didn’t respond. The only sound was Rey’s soft sobs as she cursed the Force for allowing this tragedy to befall them. What had Leia or Han or Kylo done to deserve this? Why hadn’t it intervened? All Kylo wanted was a family that loved him, and they had, but the Force had cruelly kept them apart. And he was right, now it was too late. “But I was too concerned about
what would happen if you came home,” Leia added with difficulty. It was the most emotional Rey
had ever heard the woman. “They treated me like a monster because my father was Darth Vader. I
knew how unhappy you were before, because you felt ‘different’ than everyone else. It was
everything I had tried to protect you from your whole life. So I…” her voice broke and Kylo looked
away. Rey expected anger, but all she felt from him was pain. “I asked him where you were going.
He told me you and several other students were meeting a ‘friend’ in the Outer Rim. I thought if
you had a chance to be happy – truly happy – then I would let you go. I thought I was giving you a
chance at a real life. But I regret that decision every day, Ben. I know you can’t forgive me, but –”

“No,” he answered, voice hard.

That was the point, wasn’t it? He would never forgive Rey for protecting him from the identity of
the whispers in her head, because he couldn’t forgive his mother for protecting him from the
identity of his grandfather. He would never forgive her for abandoning him in their bond, because
he had never forgiven his father for leaving him with Luke. He would never forgive her for her
darkness, because he had never forgiven Luke for his. Kylo didn’t forgive.

Though Kylo couldn’t hear her, he spoke as if he did. “I can’t forgive myself,” he replied with the
shake of his head. “It was easier to do these things I knew would hurt you if I hated you. I can’t
hate you, so I hate myself instead.”

“Ben,” his mother said and it drew his attention back to her. “If we forgive you, then what is there
left to hate yourself for?”

You forgive me for killing your friends and your brother and your husband? You forgive me for
being no better than my grandfather?”

“Yes,” she answered simply.

Kylo’s face twisted in sorrow. His voice was broken when he finally managed to rasp, “Why?”

“Because you were as much a victim of Sidious’s influence as your grandfather was,” she said.
They couldn’t hear her, but Rey covered her mouth to suppress a sob anyway. She knew it was
everything her bondmate needed to hear. “He was in your head your entire life, turning you against
everyone and we played right into his hand. We didn’t protect you from him and you
have every right to be angry at us for that. He tortured you for six years, Ben. I felt it all, but
nothing prepared me for the hopelessness in your eyes when I saw you again. I had no idea what he
did to you, I still don’t, but no one deserves that. He broke you down, manipulated you and made
you believe you had no other choice. And I know this isn’t who you want to be. If you don’t deserve another chance, then who does?”

Rey knew Kylo well enough to understand that those words wouldn’t be enough to change his mind, because they wouldn’t have been enough to change her mind. Perhaps that was why his words didn’t sting when he said, “I’ve done terrible things, I deserved what Sidious did to me. But not her. It’s all my fault. Because of me, he is in her head. I will never forgive myself for that.”

His mother hummed in response. “Does she blame you for it?”

“She blames me for keeping the secret about her parents from her,” he deflected. “And people don’t lie to – they don’t hurt – they’re not a danger to the people they...”

... the people they love.

Kylo didn’t finish, but she supposed he couldn’t. He didn’t love her. But Rey understood the intention of the sentiment; he regretted hurting her. Leia seemed to understand as well, if the knowing look in her eyes was anything to go by. She hummed, then studied him quietly for a minute. He was shaking, but he didn’t shy away under her piercing gaze.

“I was wrong, Ben,” she said with a sigh. The emotion in her voice had faded and she sounded more like the general Rey knew. “I was wrong about many things, but especially this. It is unrealistic to believe that we will never hurt the ones we love. I think what is more important is why we made that choice and what we plan to do to atone for it.”

There was a spark in his eye as if his mother had actually broken through to him. He chewed his words for a moment, then his energy withdrew again. “What does it matter – why I did it? The damage is done.” Rey was certain with those words that he would never forgive her. The damage was done.

“Love isn’t being perfect,” Leia contended, “because no one is perfect. Love is being who we are – not who we want to be – and seeing the other person for who they are – not who we want them to be. Love is wanting to be the best person you can be, inspiring the other person to be the best they can be, and finding forgiveness in the moments when you both fall short.” His face was carefully expressionless, but there was a war raging his dark eyes. He was silent, but she knew his thoughts were not.
“Is this the best you can be?” his mother pressed.

Kylo stared down at his hands and Rey found her own gaze falling. Leia was right. It was no wonder that Kylo hadn’t believed her when she said she loved him, because she had allowed her darkness to overshadow her love for him. He deserved all the love in the galaxy, all the time, not just when she wasn’t angry with him. Though she better understood how his family had lost their way, he was still the one suffering from their mistakes. How had she allowed herself to become so blinded by the dark? If she knew he would be safe, Rey would spend the rest of her life showing him the truth that was in her heart. Unfortunately, she knew now she wouldn’t have that opportunity.

When Kylo didn’t make any effort to reveal one of the thousand thoughts spiraling through his thoughts, Leia filled the silence with her own thoughts. “It’s okay, I don’t need to hear your answer,” she said. “You already know the truth.”

Her words did not have the effect that was likely intended. His eyes darkened. He nodded, but his lips were pressed in a grim line. “It doesn’t matter… none of this matters,” he rasped. “Sidious won’t stop. Ever. Not until he gets revenge for what I did. I have to stop him, but I know what he’ll do; he’ll use everything I love against me. I’m not strong enough.”

When she spoke again, his mother’s tone had also become grave. It terrified Rey that Leia didn’t deny his claims. “After everything you’ve overcome, what makes you believe you’re not strong enough, Ben?”

“Because I’ve never been strong enough.” He clenched his eyes shut. His shoulders curled in upon themselves. “I know this is all my fault and I’m the one he wants. I know I have to do this alone, but how am I supposed to defeat him? I’m just… me.”

“Because I’ve never been strong enough.” He clenched his eyes shut. His shoulders curled in upon themselves. “I know this is all my fault and I’m the one he wants. I know I have to do this alone, but how am I supposed to defeat him? I’m just… me.”

“And who are you?” she asked. It was a simple question with a not-so-simple answer. “Your grandfather was supposed to be the Chosen One who brought balance to the Force by destroying the Sith. But he fell to darkness instead. To Sidious – you were the Chosen One meant to bring balance to the Force by destroying the Jedi. But you have a choice, Ben, to fight for what is right. And it is terrifying. We all put on a brave face, but I don’t think anyone who has ever stood up against evil has thought any differently than you do right now. No one is born a legend; they can come from anywhere – a queen of a core world, a slave, a child raised by Jedi, the son of Darth Vader, a princess,” she said with a chuckle, “a smuggler, a child of a rebellion, the daughter of the man who created the death star, a former stormtrooper, a pilot, a mechanic, a scavenger,” she paused and Rey bit back tears. How could Leia believe she had any place in that war. “Why not the son of those ‘legends’ who lost his way when he was deceived by the man who hated his family most?”
Kylo opened his eyes, though they were still downcast. His energy was intense as he sucked in heaving breaths, but it wasn’t unstable. Despite the conflict raging inside him, he wasn’t reaching for dark. He was grasping onto the light. He had everything he needed to defeat Sidious… in himself. Rey smiled through her tears.

His eyes snapped upward and then he stood abruptly. “Where are you going?”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” she said. “but you don’t need me for this next part.” For a fleeting moment, Rey could almost see Leia standing before him, gently brushing the hair from his forehead. “Trust in your heart. Let the Force guide you. You’ll find your way; I believe in you… You already know what you have to do.” Before Kylo could respond, the illusion disappeared. In between blinks, she was gone. It had happened so quickly that Rey wondered if she had seen anything at all.

“No, I don’t!” Kylo shouted after her. “I don’t know what to do. I need your help.”

After a moment of silence, he crumpled to his knees. “Please,” he whispered. His head dropped to his hands. His face was obscured by his hands, but the shudder in his shoulders was proof enough of the sorrow she would have seen in his eyes. Rey wanted to reach for him, to hold him as she did after the last time he saw his mother, but all she could do was watch. She had never felt further away from him than in that moment. She was merely an observer in a moment she had longed for, but it was bittersweet, because she knew why she had been brought there.

Through their connection, the Force had shown her what she begged to see; it had shown her what would happen to Kylo without her. Nothing. He was suffering alone, but the light in him was strong – stronger than she had felt in him since their paths intersected on Takodana. She knew what it meant; this was the Force’s way of showing her that it would be okay. He would be okay… without her. He didn’t need her to turn. The Force had shown her what she had to do now. Rey turned to tell Luke as much, but he was gone.

“Ben?” she asked with trembling, broken softness. “I wish you could hear me right now. I wish you could know that you’re not alone, even if it feels like you are. I’ll always be here, thinking about you, and wondering if you’ll be okay. You’ll hate me for what I have to do, but I love you, I’ll never stop loving you.” Rey aggressively wiped the tears from her cheeks, holding onto the dream with all her might. Just one more minute, she begged the Force, just let me say goodbye. She willed him to look up, so she could see his eyes one last time. She wanted to memorize them with the light she knew she’d find inside them. The Force, however, refused to heed her last request. She supposed she didn’t deserve it.

After a moment, his head still grasped in his hands, he began sobbing. His connection to the Force faltered and there was a snap in the Force. He was gone. She was alone. Rey stared at the
emptiness where he had been as she tried to accept her new reality.

In that moment, it was difficult to remember the beautiful moments on Kamino in the storage room or under the stars. The memories that tormented her were dark and violent, the words that haunted her were cruel and cutting. She supposed it was better that way; it would remind her why she had to shut him out. It would be difficult to remember in those lonely nights when she craved what she only just realized was the belonging she had been searching for her entire life. It was a reminder that she had lost control of her darkness. She had nearly killed the man she loved. She had to do this to protect him, but it would be the hardest thing she ever had to do.
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however.

As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“Blue! We have to go!” Kylo shouted as he sprinted into his quarters from the meditation room. Pulling on layers of cowls and cloaks in preparation for the freezing temperatures on Ilum, he cursed himself for not choosing to leave sooner. After Sidious had revealed his plan and Kylo had witnessed what his former master could do to Rey in her darkness, he had turned to meditation in search of the right answer. His mother had given him the only answer he needed.

You already know what you have to do.

He did. Rey was in very real, immediate danger. He had warned Rose not to go to Ilum, but he knew his bondmate. She would not heed his warnings; he could sense it with everything in him, because he wouldn’t have heeded the warnings either. Kylo refused to stand by and do nothing anymore. He didn’t care if Rey hated him, he had to find her before the First Order did—at all costs. Every threat that Rey faced was his fault and he wouldn’t allow her to suffer for his failures. He would protect her from the First Order. He didn’t know how he would do it yet, but for the first time in years, he had hope. His hands shook as he struggled into his boots, partly in exhilaration for the choice he had made, partly in fear of how Rey would react when she discovered his plan.

In order for her to discover his plan, however, he would have to create something resembling one first. He needed something more than “find Rey,” at least. Certainly, he could have used his power to intervene. Theoretically, he could do everything he needed to do to protect them from the safety of the Finalizer. Every single trooper could be moved off-planet by his order. They would have to pull out of the entire sector if he commanded it to be so, and he could go alone to intercept her on-world. But he would have to trust that Hux would not follow him, and he would have to leave her to go back to the First Order eventually. He could hold off the First Order until he fell to mutiny, and hope it would be long enough until she escaped. Kylo found that he didn’t want to return to the First Order. But he could give them the information they needed to destroy the Finalizer and Force Destiny with it. Rose was right. One day, what he could do from this side would not be enough, and his mother helped him realize that time had come.

It had been his missteps and mistakes that had led them to that very real nightmare. But Sidious’s misstep had been using Rey against him; apparently his former master hadn’t learned the first time. At some point since Crait, protecting her from the evil he helped create had become his only reason to stay. Rose was right, his mother was right, Rey was right… he was only fooling himself in his belief that he could protect her as Supreme Leader. The moment he had realized he could no longer protect her from the First Order was the moment his conflict ended. With that newfound understanding, he left his quarters without a backward glance.

Kylo had no reason left to stay, he knew that, but he still stopped short at the end of the corridor. Blue nearly ran into him as he struggled to take the next step. He had a choice. The droid stared up at him but didn’t say anything, somehow understanding the significance of Kylo’s thoughts. Hesitating in the center of the corridor, he looked back and forth between the two directions. One way led to the bridge to command the troops, the other led to the hanger. Each had dire, irrevocable consequences. Could he do this? Could he give up everything he fought for—everything he sacrificed for? The idea of it still caused a tightness in his throat.
He made his decision.

Kylo turned in the direction of the hangar, and Blue followed beside him obediently, the droid’s domed head swiveling back and forth between Kylo and their destination. There was no turning back from this; he was choosing to commit the worst kind of treason. There was an exhilaration building in his chest to finally be free of all of it.

He would have to escape off the Finalizer, find Rey on Ilum, give her the information to destroy the Finalizer, ensure her escape, call the Knights of Ren to his side, and prepare for war. This focused relentlessness was the most dangerous aspect of his personality; he knew that. It made him desperate, obsessive, and unpredictable in his determination. He would let no one stand in his way. For once, it would be an asset for the Resistance. Nothing was guaranteed; there were infinite ways it could go sideways, yet he hadn’t expected the next two words:

"Supreme Leader!"

It was the last man he wanted to see. Along with the typical irritation, an indiscernible disquiet swiftly became impossible to ignore. "Not now, General!" Kylo shouted back at the man, but it wasn’t convincingly authoritative. He could hear the fear in his own voice. Kylo continued down the corridor with Blue by his side, trying his best to ignore Hux scurrying behind him. He tried to present the air of a man who had more significant preoccupations than his soon-to-be former general’s desires. The most urgent and consequential was contemplating a plan to escape a floating city armed to the teeth with weapons, in hyperspace, as the highest-ranking—and therefore least inconspicuous—person on the ship. A thousand possibilities flooded his mind, none of which were favorable.

_I would be defenseless in the command shuttle. It is not suitable for evasive maneuvering from the TIE fighters that would inevitably be sent to dispatch me. Although its deflector shields would be a welcome advantage. Can I make it to Ilum in the TIE Silencer? I would at least have a chance once I'm out of range of their laser cannons. The TIE fighters would be no match. It has a decent hyperdrive, theoretically, I could have just enough to make it to—_

"Ren!" The general shrieked. Kylo’s internal thought process was interrupted. He turned toward Hux incredulously.

“What!?” Kylo shouted, throwing his arms out dramatically. “Is this about your efforts on Barkhesh? Have you found them?”
"Yes."

Kylo would have continued the tirade had his growing disquiet not fastened upon the word, evolving into full-blown panic. He froze, turning to face his general. No, it's impossible. He didn’t have the strength to ask the question that carried consequences beyond either of their imaginations, but his general answered as if he had. “An unlikely informant has provided the location of the Resistance. There has been confirmation of the *Millennium Falcon* in the 7G sector. We have adjusted the course to intercept. What are your orders?” The new development changed everything...instantly. It was too late to abandon the *Finalizer* and find Rey before she was discovered. His greatest fear was realized. The First Order had found her first. It was time for a new plan...her life depended upon it.

"Patience, General,” he said with a calm he certainly didn’t feel. “Do not intercept. The light freighter can and will easily outmaneuver this Star Destroyer, despite whatever foolproof plan you have conceived. Pursue the freighter until it lands. I will secure them on the planet's surface. We take the prisoners alive."

"Yes, Supreme Leader,” Hux smiled, “We finally have the girl responsible for the assassination of Snoke within our grasp. For such a powerful Jedi—who defeated you twice and killed your master and his elite guard single-handedly—she made a foolish decision returning to the 7G sector. She must be headed for Starkiller."

"Foolish, indeed Hux." Her fatal mistake wasn’t heading to the remains of Starkiller, however. There was nothing left after what the Resistance had done to it, though, in the scheme of ill-advised ideas, returning to a ball of plasma still made more sense than landing on the First Order’s largest mining operation in the galaxy’s most wanted ship. *Why of all the planets in the entire galaxy, Rey, did you choose Ilum?*

He stood staring, lost to his frenzied thoughts. The general stepped closer, his smile growing wider. “Anything else?”

“We must prepare for war,” he said distantly. “Reinforce the bridges. We must ensure that none of the anarchists can override a bridge in lockdown from the outside or enter once emergency procedures have been activated. All lockdown controls must be accessible on the bridge only.”

For once, the general did not question his motives. “Yes, sir.”

Kylo watched the general retreat back down the hallway with a confidence he wished he could possess. Kylo knew what it meant for his chances. In every game of Dejarik, there came a single
move—one moment—when the opponents turned the last corner to the endgame. Kylo remembered that confidence when the road to victory was all but assured…and the fear and disillusionment when defeat was inevitable. He had seen other players hold onto hope and denial until the bitter end, but not him.

Kylo saw the moves before him now. Every scenario left him with the same conclusion; the First Order would win, they would reincarnate Sidious, and the Resistance would fall. But he couldn’t stand by and watch it inevitably unfold. He would fight certainty, he would try to find hope when there was none, but he would need help. In his panic, he didn’t even move out of the corridor – and out of the sight of others who could easily walk around the corridor and discover them. Closing his eyes, he found her.

Rey.

The bond pulled taut between them, and he waited in anticipation for her to appear. He knew she was angry with him, but this was beyond either of them. If she wanted to scream, he’d let her. If she refused to talk, so be it. But he wouldn’t stop until she knew the danger lurking behind her.

Rey appeared in the corridor, appearing just as much as she did when he saw her last, except she had changed her clothes. Her trousers were black, her tunic dark grey, her hair still pulled back in the braid. Kylo knew she would be angry, but he wasn’t prepared for the darkness he found when she turned and her eyes met his. The voice inside him was screaming the words he needed to tell her, but they stuck in his throat.

He had seen her dressed like this once, in a vision, when she listened to Sidious. From the moment he touched her hand on Ahch-To, he knew the key to her darkness was her parents. Clearly, so did Sidious. But no matter how far she fell into darkness, he knew she wouldn’t join that monster. She knew what Sidious had done to him. If there was one certainty he believed, it was that Rey would never willingly serve that creature. Even in her darkness, she was too good. He didn’t care what the vision had shown him; he knew that much. Despite his confidence, he was still paralyzed with fear that their paths had taken them one step closer to the realization of that destiny.

“Rey…”

She raised her hand, demanding his silence. Her eyes first focused on the wound above his eyebrow then trailed down to his side. “Let me see your wound.” Kylo had already forgotten the injury her friend had helped heal, but he acquiesced. Her request was better than drawing her weapon, even if it was entirely unnecessary. Without a word, he lifted his tunic, revealing the partially healed skin. “Good,” she said with a nod, “Then I can shut out this bond with a clear conscience.”
The panic released the fettered control he held over his emotions. He knew she would never forgive him for what he had done to protect her, but he wasn’t expecting this. She hated him. “Rey, wait—”

She shook her head and stepped back out of his reach. “No.” A tear escaped down her cheek, but she stayed resolute. “You need to stay as far away from me as possible.”

“Please! Don’t shut me out again,” he begged as he grabbed her arm and forced her to stay with him, just a moment longer. He knew she was angry with him, but he told her he would leave. How could she abandon him now? Why wouldn't she look him in the eye? If this was truly what she wanted, why was her energy suffocating with pain? “You can’t go to Ilum, the First Order—”

“You have no right to tell me what to do,” she snapped, but there was not the venom he expected behind those words. She ripped her arm out of his grasp. Her eyes wouldn't meet his desperate stare. He could almost hear the words she implied, not while you still stay with them.

Chewing his lip, he reluctantly shook his head. He wanted to leave, he had tried to, but… “I can’t leave…not yet.”

“And I can’t do this, I’m not strong enough. I can’t even look at you! It hurts too much,” she said. “Why can’t you just be angry like before? I kept secrets from you remember? I almost killed you.” Rey backed away from him and turned. Their bond was in shatters, she was trying to shut him out, and he was to blame. If that was his punishment for trying to protect her, then so be it. He wouldn’t apologize, not for that. He would do it again in a heartbeat. She wanted him to be angry with her, angry enough that he would shut her out as well, but he wouldn’t make it easy for her.

With a stifled sob, Rey fled, but he couldn’t let her shut him out yet. She was in danger. He would let her go if that was what she wanted, but not until he told her about what awaited her on Ilum. Before she could break the connection, he chased after her. “You don’t understand,” he shouted, “there was an informant, and—”

“Please, don’t make this harder than it has to be!” she cried as she darted down another corridor, attempting to escape him.

Kylo knew he was risking a physical reaction, but he wouldn’t stop until he knew she was safe. He used the Force to increase his speed and catch her, wrapping his arm around her waist to prevent her from fleeing. “You have to ditch the Falcon and disappear. They know where—”
“Let go!” she screamed, shoving him away with the Force. He collapsed to the floor in the corridor. She paused, blinking away tears. Why was there no anger in her eyes? Did she care so little that she felt nothing toward him? “You shouldn’t be afraid of the Falcon or Ilum! You should be afraid of me!” Kylo wanted to tell her that her threats were ineffective against him. He knew she would never hurt him. Even if she did want to kill him, then he would let her. But he would never fear her.

Instead of jumping to his feet and giving chase, risking a violent altercation, he chose to stay and plead instead. He stood slowly, hands raised in surrender. Rey lifted her arm, and Kylo wondered if she would shove him with the Force again. He felt the familiar cloak of paralysis instead. “Fine, do what you have to do, shut me out, but, please, just listen first.”

“I can’t risk staying, I don’t know what I’ll do,” she whispered, turning away from him with finality. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Rey, don’t go to Ilum, you’re flying right into—”

“Please, just stay away from me,” she cried, fleeing in the opposite direction without looking back. Kylo flinched when the bond slammed shut, and the Force released him of its hold.

“You’re flying right into their trap,” he finished. That was it then; she had shut him out for good. Sidious had gotten exactly what he wanted. Well, not exactly. The creature had torn them apart, just as he had done to every other relationship in Kylo’s life. The difference this time was Kylo wouldn’t join him. He had Rey to thank for that. It was for the best – he convinced himself – that Rey shut him out. It meant she shut out his darkness as well. Kylo had to believe it was enough to keep her safe from Sidious’ control. It would buy him more time. If he couldn’t stop her from going to Ilum, then he’d wait and stop the First Order from capturing her instead.
Chapter End Notes

Kylo briefly chases and restrains Rey
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Poe Dameron strolled confidently into the room full of commanding officers from allied systems around the galaxy. He took a seat at the head of the table.
“Admiral Dameron,” they addressed him respectfully. He nodded dutifully. A Mon Calamari pulled up the battle schematic on the holotable. “We have organized the fleet as you have requested. We are currently coordinating the extensive strike plan you designed. It is quite the undertaking to organize all of the allied forces to strike concurrently.”

“But it is necessary,” Poe interjected.

Be that as it may, we have scouts on most of the flotillas of the FO fleet, but, unfortunately, we have been unable to locate the Finalizer.”

“Leave that to me.” A cocky grin was plastered across Poe’s face, “I know exactly where they will be.”

“Sir?” the Duros general to his left questioned expectantly. Confusion spread across his green face.

Poe leaned back and rested his hands behind his head smugly. “As we speak, our secret weapon is landing on the surface of Ilum, the largest First Order mining center in the galaxy.”

“The girl Jedi?” the general asked. “I was unaware she was involved in a trap?”

“An ingenious trap, if you ask me,” the Resistance pilot chuckled, “The First Order will ultimately notice the most infamous and recognizable ship in the galaxy. Kylo Ren will be unable to resist her. He will lead the Finalizer straight into our grasp.” The others seemed skeptical—or at least not as confident as the admiral. They were tentative allies, only merging their militaries out of necessity. While most of the strong personalities had accepted Poe as their interim leader, promoting him to admiral, he had to prove his worth to them before they would follow him anywhere.

Another voice broke through the silence. “An doe Hutts moolee-rah tah hopa doe Jedai gee nudcha nolee ya Ilum.” The Hutt was merely a hologram, but the others stared at him in revulsion as if they had to share the same recycled air as the creature.

“What did it say?” an Ithurian asked, feigning a cough to suppress a gag.

“He said,” Poe translated with a reproachful tone, “that they are flying to Ilum to protect the Jedi and ambush any First Order troops there.”
“I thought the Hutts hate the Jedi. Can we trust them?”

“Tagwa, jee-jee naga tah killyah First Order chuba Jedai,” the Hutt barked.

Poe raised his hand to the Ithurian and another general from Wobani who moved to interrupt. “He said you can trust them because their revenge is focused on the First Order.”

“For what?”

“The First Order destroyed Nal Hutta and its moon, Nar Shadaa. Only Grakkus and the other members of the cartel traveling to rendezvous with the Resistance survived. The others will join us in the attack on the Finalizer.”

“You really have thought of everything, Admiral,” the Mon Calamari admired, though Poe couldn’t discern whether his tone was mocking.

“That’s only the half of it, General,” he replied. “While we ambush the Finalizer, she will lure Kylo Ren to the surface, where Resistance members are waiting to assassinate him. Without a leader and with no other Force-users to take command, there will be a power vacuum. While the upper officers fight to fill the role, the First Order will be weak and vulnerable to our attack.”

“And we can trust this girl to entice him there? Will he not be able to see through an obvious ambush?”

“That’s the ingenious part,” Poe’s eyes were alight in his hubris, “she has no idea the role she plays. He will be lured to the surface by his pure desire to be with her. She is his weakness, men, and she will be his downfall.”
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See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The *Finalizer* lurched as it exited hyperspace outside of Ilum. This was it. He didn’t know how he would do it, but he was about to betray the throne and commit treason. The consequences were more bearable when he reminded himself of who it was for. He hoped he could make it to the surface, help her escape to the Unknown Regions, and make it back to destroy *Force Destiny* before Hux became suspicious. It was a tall order but not entirely out of the realm of possibility.

Kylo had just finished wrapping his cloak around his shoulders, staring out at the planet through the viewport, when the battle alarms sounded.

*No. It can’t be.*

His lightsaber flew to his hand as he sprinted for the door. Blue stayed hot on his heels as he raced down the corridor to the bridge. Blue questioned what the sounds meant, but Kylo couldn’t admit it; he refused—it had to be a mistake.

“Hux, what is that?” Kylo demanded as he stormed onto the bridge. The general faced away from him, standing over the shoulder of an officer as they monitored something on a screen.

“Cannons are primed at eighty percent,” the officer announced.

“Excellent,” the general said, turning to face him. “Ah, Ren, how… fortunate you could join us.”

“Cannons?” He knew. He had heard the priming alarms before, but never on the *Finalizer*. He knew what these cannons would be, but he still didn’t want to accept it. He wouldn’t be able to avoid the choice he had thus far been unwilling to make.

“Orbital Autocannons,” Hux confirmed. “My latest creation from Weapons Development. If you had attended more of the meetings, you would have been privy to its progress….”
Kylo didn’t miss the knowing smile that crossed the general’s face. This was a holochess game, and Hux had him backed into a corner. They both knew it. “The cannons are primed and ready,” the officer relayed.

“Good. Fire at will. They will rip apart this planet as they did to D’Qar, snuffing out the Resistance once and for all.”

“No!” Kylo ordered with more desperation than he had intended. “Do not presume to command my ship.”

Hux’s smile only grew wider. “What is your order then, Supreme Leader?”

The other officers turned to stare at him. “I am going down to the surface to capture the anarchists alive. You will hold fire until I return.” Some of the officers nodded in deference, others turned toward Hux for confirmation. The weight of their missing stares was heavy. He was losing the bridge; the pieces were falling exactly how Hux wanted them to.

“You are the Supreme Leader, Ren! It’s not just a title and power. It’s time you start acting like one. These men are looking to you to command them. What if this ship were to be attacked while you take unnecessary risks going down to the surface? Your weakness is a liability to us all. You want stability? The First Order needs a stable leader, not a love-struck, tantruming child who runs off to fulfill his personal agenda at a moment's whim!” Hux shouted.

I don’t care anymore! I don’t care about the power, or the title, or the Order! I only care about her!

“I’m going down to the surface.” His hand was raised in threat, but Hux’s defiance didn’t waiver.

“Not as our Supreme Leader.”

“Fine. I relinquish the throne to anyone but you,” he said with the twitch of a smile on his face. “Now I’m going down to the surface, and you can’t do anything to stop me.”

Kylo knew the struggle over power his abdication would create, giving him time to reach Rey and
her friends. He had to try. Without another word, he turned to leave the bridge, curious why the
general had not argued further. Blue was at his heels, beeping in excitement. The blastdoors
opened, and he nearly ran into an officer on the other side.

No, not an officer.

A Knight.

“Ah, there he is. Meet our new Supreme Leader, Ren,” Hux said cheerfully behind him. The other
man was tall, dressed in all black, a cloak fastened at his shoulders. Kylo focused in terror first on
the ribbed tunic, then the arm guards, then up to the mask. It was a terrifyingly familiar mask,
though this one looked brand new. Kylo staggered back into the room as the other man removed
the mask with a mechanical hiss. His eyes were so fixated on the face he loathed more than any
other that he didn’t notice the other man raise a blaster until it was too late. *He didn’t kill them all,*
was his last thought before he was blinded by a bright blue light, and then the floor rose up to
meet him.

“Fire at will,” the new Supreme Leader commanded as he stepped over Kylo to join General Hux
on the bridge.
Chapter End Notes

Threat of violence
Cannons are aimed at Resistance members on a planet
Violence
Kylo is shot with a blaster
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The Millennium Falcon touched down on the vast, white surface of Ilum. Snow and crystalline formations encompassed the landscape as far as the eye could see, which, at the time, wasn’t very far. They had landed in the center of a howling blizzard, the flurry obscuring visibility more than ten to fifteen yards in any direction. When they had prepared for landing, Rey briefly noticed a large crystalline crevasse through the clouds. It was carved into the base of a fog-enveloped slope. She felt drawn to it.
The trio bundled up in cold weather jackets and attire. Poe had asked them to be in constant contact over the comlink, so Chewbacca was left behind on the Falcon. Rey stared out into the blizzard. After shutting out the bond, she had spent the rest of the journey to Ilum crying in her bunk. Their last confrontation had been more painful than she could imagine. She had been trying to protect him from herself, but she knew she had hurt him anyway. The look in his eyes before she walked away... it haunted her. The only way she had found the courage to do it was remembering the other image that haunted her – the sight of his lifeless body in the illusion. It was tearing her apart to shut him out, but at least he was alive. Now, as Rey breathed in the biting air from Ilum, she tried her best to focus on the step ahead. The Force was strong here. It called to her. The energy inside her swarmed with purpose.

They trudged across the snow in silence, snowflakes whirling around them, the wind whipping at their coats. It reminded her of her first fight with Kylo on Starkiller. She was better equipped for the weather this time, but this cold penetrated her bones. The other glaring difference was the absence of the man who—over the past several weeks—had become her bondmate, her confidante, the most frustrating man in the galaxy, but also the man she had grown to love. Rey tried to focus on her mission, but the weight of what she had done consumed her thoughts.

She should have told him she loved him before she shut him out. She remembered what it felt like when Kylo had been the one to walk away. The only difference was that she had deserved it, Kylo didn’t. He had kept secrets from her, but she had kept the greatest one of all. What had he done when he discovered the truth about Sidious? He helped her. No matter what he did, he was always there for her in his way. As long as he remained with the First Order, he was implicitly against everything she stood for, but it didn’t feel like she had to fight for him anymore. He was doing that on his own. Rose, whose entire family had been murdered by the First Order, saw something in him. She believed in him, trusted him enough to share their location. Blue had seen him spare those prisoners. Leia believed in him. Rey had felt his light. This went beyond what she believed she saw in him, he was changing. He didn’t need her or the bond to do the right thing.

That was probably for the best. The darkness in her had systematically destroyed everything good in her life. It had killed her parents, left her on a desert world, pushed her friends away and threatened the life of the man she loved. What would it do now? Was anyone safe around her? Rey focused more of her energy on blocking it out. It was difficult; her life felt like it was spiraling around her with the snow. She was plagued with conflict that left the darkness always hovering just within reach. But she couldn’t contain her fear of the ‘what ifs.’ She feared what she could do to him. What if her darkness in the bond prevented him from saving himself? What if the darkness led to his death by her hand, as had happened in the illusion? What if she didn’t shut him out, and he fell again? But even worse, what if she did shut him out and she lost him anyway? She promised he would never be alone again; could she break that promise for his safety? She didn’t want him to stay with the First Order to protect her, so wasn’t this his choice to make?

Did it matter anymore, or was her conflict all for naught? She had hurt him; she had seen it in his
eyes. Perhaps he would want nothing to do with her again. Did he know she shut him out to protect him? Or did he think she hated him? Had he ever believed her that she loved him in the first place? Did he believe he was alone again? With what they were up against, he needed her more than ever. Was her fear for his life more important than helping him protect the entire galaxy? That more than anything solidified her decision that she would reopen the bond after Ilum. He needed her help with destroying Force Destiny. When Sidious was destroyed, she would apologize for everything she had done in fear. If he hated her, if he wanted to walk away, then she would let him.

She watched Rose and Finn walk together. He held her hand gently, smiling at her as she kicked at the snow. They reminded her of Leia’s description of her early relationship with Han. By Rose’s account, their relationship started in conflict. They didn’t hate each other, but their early interactions were filled with irritation and arguments. They were on the same side, but they sure didn’t like each other. Forced to work together through circumstance, the only similarity between them was their desire to save the Resistance. They formed an unlikely partnership, and as the frustration and contempt wore away, affection developed in its place. They came to understand and appreciate each other. Before either of them realized it, or were willing to admit it, they were in love. She could tell by watching them that they were deeply in love. She had faith that her friends would find a way to make their relationship work in ways that Leia and Han could not, because they both put each other over everything else...even the war.

While Rose and Finn had a relationship that started with ideological and perceptive disagreements, they were eventually able to come to an understanding; their personalities complemented the other. Something inside her told Rey that Han and Leia were destined for failure because they were two very different people. Leia had lost too many loved ones to an evil regime whose deadliest enforcer was her father. She threw herself into her job, working to ensure it never happened again, even though that decision played a hand in her son becoming the enforcer of the very organization she had tried to prevent. Han was a good man, but he was a free spirit; his heart belonged to the stars. Rey supposed it never would have worked—two vastly different people in love. Maybe it was destined to turn out the way it did. If that was the case, then Kylo was right; he was destined from birth to fall. She hoped that wherever they were, Han and Leia were together. She hoped they finally had the chance at the love they deserved, because they never had that chance in life.

Rey wondered what that meant for her and Kylo? Were they more like Finn and Rose—similar in character, but lacking communication skills? If not, did that make them like Han and Leia: drawn to each other but with hearts and convictions pulling them in opposite directions? Since the moment they first met, they’d been at odds, and nothing had changed except that she loved him. They still fought, perhaps worse than they had on Acht-To. He had known the Resistance location and not told her; she had been cruel in her darkness; they had nearly killed each other; she hadn’t told Poe the truth, and he believed those lies; he had learned nothing from Barkhesh and had given Maz the coordinates to Dantooine; she had given the vial he entrusted her with to Poe; and—the worst—he hadn’t told her that she killed her parents, and she hadn’t told him about Sidious. Not to mention, he was the leader of an evil regime that was hell-bent on killing her and her friends. And she had shut him out. How could they reconcile that? Would any of it change when they were on the same side? Certainly, they understood each other better than anyone else ever would, and there were many aspects to who he was that resonated profoundly in her soul. That was something Han and Leia never had, but what would it matter if Kylo wasn’t given the chance to be who he was meant to be?
Was the Skywalker family doomed to suffer? By all accounts, the history of the Skywalker family was plagued with tragedy. They were destined for it. Anakin was created by the Force to be the Chosen One. He had been happy, but he fell to the dark side. He lost both his mother and the love of his life. He tried to save Padme by turning to darkness, then lost her in his misguided attempt to save her. He murdered the closest person that he ever had to a brother, and he never got to know his own children. His final choice saved his son, but he had only a moment of happiness before he died. Was all of that suffering worth it for a moment, especially when the rest of the galaxy never heard his story?

Then there was Luke... oh Luke. He never fell to darkness, though he was tempted. He was a legend, but one single moment of weakness, one consideration to do the wrong thing for the right reasons, destroyed it all. He spent the majority of his life in self-imposed exile. He experienced no love, no children, and he was separated from his twin sister and friends. He blamed himself for the fall of his nephew, refusing to pass on a legacy to Rey, and then he died alone. He died with purpose, but was his suffering worth it?

Leia had deserved happiness, she deserved to have everything she ever wanted, and, for a short while, she did. She had helped save the galaxy. She had a husband and a son who loved her. She was making a difference in the New Republic. Then her own fears and the whispers of one monster changed everything. She lost her brother, her husband, and her son. She died in heartache. Even if her hope was restored when she was able to see her son one last time, was her suffering worth it?

Then there was Ben Solo—now Kylo Ren—the last of the Skywalker bloodline. He fell to darkness like his grandfather, except he didn’t fall for love. Quite the opposite. He lost everyone he ever cared for long before their deaths. A monster had torn apart his family from the moment he was born. Did he ever have a chance to be happy? Would his life end in tragedy as his parents’, his uncle’s, his grandfather’s lives had? Was the fate of the Skywalker line only to suffer? Rey wouldn’t believe that. She couldn’t believe the Force itself would create that family and destine them all to a tragic end. She couldn’t believe the Force would bring them together so she could watch him die as her enemy. Every moment he spent with the First Order, however, was a step closer to sealing his fate.

Why won’t he just turn like I know he can?

The slope loomed in front of them, fog obscuring its entirety. Judging by the base, it was massive. She was thankful her crystal did not rest at its peak, though she wondered what it meant that the Force wasn’t guiding her up there. No, it was calling to her in a wide opening in the snow. It stretched as far as they could see in either direction, and when she stared into its depths, she couldn’t see the bottom. Somewhere in that deep darkness, however, she could feel something calling to her, as the lightsaber had on Takodana, as Kylo’s energy did across the bond.
This is it. Somewhere down there, it’s waiting for me. I will finally have my very own Kyber crystal.
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Kylo had been shot at enough to react on instinct. On Starkiller, he had contained a lethal amount of energy from the bolt from Chewbacca’s bowcaster on the skyway. This blaster had been set to stun—for what purpose Hux still needed him alive, he wasn’t certain—and he was able to contain the majority of it. His mind was sluggish and disoriented, but he heard the order, familiar behind the vocoder, “Fire at will.”

Rey and her friends were in danger; he had to stop Hux by whatever means necessary. He closed his eyes, reaching far into the Force, searching the ship for the incredible amount of energy that was building in the cannons. He considered his options with his capabilities in the Force. He could possibly create a barrier around the muzzles to contain the compounding energy inside the cannons long enough to create an explosion in the bore. It was the most probable scenario for success, taking into account his abilities; but it was also the most dangerous. It would disable the cannons, but the collateral damage would be extensive. It could cripple the ship, driving it into the gravitational pull of Ilum. With the ship’s primary hypermatter-annihilation reactor, he would be creating a bomb that no one on the surface would survive.

Any other option required Force abilities he wasn’t confident he possessed. Halting that amount of energy into stasis from this distance would only delay the inevitable. It would drain him in seconds. He wouldn’t have time to change the trajectory. *The trajectory.* Even if he did have enough power to alter the cannons course, the officer at the controls…

He had an idea. It wasn’t the best idea, but it was *an* idea.

Kylo could feel the change in energy as the officer fired the weapon. He stood, then manipulated the Force to overpower the operator’s hand on the toggle of the cannon controls, altering the direction of the cannons. Each orbital cannon swung ninety degrees just as the weapons fired, missing the planet and firing out into space. The officer fought him to redirect the cannons, and he exerted more power, groaning under the effort.

Kylo’s new—or perhaps oldest—adversary took notice; the Knight sprinted across the bridge, tackling him to the ground. He maintained his connection to the controls as the weapons continued to fire, while the Knight fought to subdue him, pinning him to the floor with a hand around his throat. Spots appeared in his vision as he quickly ran out of air. His grip over the toggle slipped as he lost consciousness. He had failed. It wasn’t anything new; he always failed, but this time his failure would leave no one to stand between the First Order and the Resistance. Rey. He tried across their connection. He could only think of one word, the same word he had used to save his mother from the First Order years ago. *Run.*

Kylo stared up into the eyes of the Knight who would kill him and take his place. His eyes were dark, cold, empty of emotion. It was a perspective Kylo never thought he would see. It was ironic that this would be how he fell; for all his planning and fail-safes, he would be instrumental in his own death. How had he not *foreseen* this? It was crystal clear to him now what Hux’s plan had been all along. Kylo had handed his general the path to victory on a silver platter.

All at once, he was gasping for breath as the vise around his throat released. The Knight above him cried out as his body jolted and fell backward. Blue hovered over him with his version of an
electro-shock prod screeching threateningly. Realizing his window was small, Kylo focused on the autocannon control panel. He allowed the darkness inside, and it fed on the fear and anger of all his mistakes and failures that had led to Rey becoming the target in their cross-hairs. He lifted his arm toward the controls, focusing all the building energy to the tips of his fingers. The energy snapped through the room, releasing from his hand as a blue sphere rather than the lightning he had been attempting to wield. It worked as intended, however. The ball of pure energy crashed into the control panel, disabling it in a rain of sparks. The energy affected the neighboring stations, and the bridge erupted into a frenzy of damage control.

“Blue, let’s go!” he shouted to the droid, sprinting through the blastdoor before he lost his chance to escape. “Go ahead, get to the Silencer!” They would never allow him to leave, but if he could avoid the surface cannons, he could outrun anyone they sent after him. The more of a head start he could get, the better his chances to get to Rey. If he didn’t make it, she wouldn’t know what Hux had done. If he could just warn her, they would have a chance. He could hold off the First Order while Rey helped her friends escape.

He expected to encounter more resistance on his path to the hangar, but no alarms blared, no stormtroopers chased him, no orders broadcast over the Master Comms. He didn’t encounter a single lifeform in the corridors or the hanger. He expected to be forced to shoot his way off that ship, but they let him go.

It was almost too easy.

Kylo pushed the yoke forward as he rocketed out of the hangar, diving far below the ship to avoid the cannons. It would force him to enter the Ilum atmosphere at a dangerous angle, so he chose to circle under and then back over the planet to enter from above. If other TIEs were sent to meet him head-on, at least he could see them coming.

The hypertransceiver flickered with the familiar image of his former general. His voice was light, almost mirthful, when he spoke. “Where are you going, traitor?”

“You’re the traitor,” Kylo replied, pulling the ship closer to the planet’s atmosphere to use its gravitational pull to slingshot him around it. He knew that seconds were precious. Other fighters could appear at any moment. “You disobeyed my orders to cease fire.”

Hux turned to an officer to whisper something in his ear. When he spoke again, it was with an air of superiority. “And yet… I’m not the one running away. What will you do now?”

“Come look for me, and you’ll find out.”

The general rolled his eyes and sighed. Kylo’s words had stoked the fire as he’d hoped they would. “You brought all this upon yourself, Ren. You disabled my autocannons!”

“You planned a mutiny!” Kylo growled back.

“You killed the Supreme Leader for a worthless rebel girl!”

That was it. That was when Kylo realized that Hux had played the game well; he had been three steps ahead the entire time. Hux knew. He didn’t know how, but Hux knew what happened in that throne room. He had been patient and calculating, and Kylo had played into his trap perfectly—the Knight was evidence of that. “So what now? You clearly don’t need me anymore. Will you play the puppetmaster? You don’t seem the type to allow others to steal your glory.”

“You’re right; I don’t need you anymore, though you played your part exceptionally well,” Hux
smiled wickedly. “I will follow the orders of the true Supreme Leader until we quash the rebellion once and for all. Then I will take my rightful place once our current Supreme Leader suffers a terrible accident. Pity you won’t live to see my plan realized. You will die with your little girlfriend.”

“You come after her, I will burn you, your new Supreme Leader, the Finalizer, the Order, all of it; I will burn all of it to the ground.”

“With what army?” Hux spat. “Without the power of the throne, you’re nothing! Everything you’ve ever done is for nothing.”

“We’ll see.” Kylo switched off the hypertransceiver and banked sharply to enter Ilum’s atmosphere.
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--- CHAPTER 115 ---
Rey had made it to the caves; she would finally be a Jedi. She hugged the two friends who had stood by her through it all, preparing herself to take one fateful step closer to her destiny.

“Thank you for coming with me,” she told them. Rose hugged her first, supportive and warm, though Rey knew Rose didn’t understand the significance of being there. Finn hugged her next, grasping her in his famously tight embrace that left her little doubt that she was loved. It was, however, suspiciously affectionate after their recent argument. He had a strange expression on his face, as if he didn’t want to tell her something. She was not in the mood to discover the reason.

It can wait. I’ll ask him after I find my crystal.

She stood at the edge of the sprawling darkness. A tension grasped her, luring her toward the chasm. This is where I am supposed to be. She steadied her breathing, wrapping a makeshift harness around her waist. The others worked to secure the end, staying behind on the surface. It was a journey she knew she had to make alone. Her fear of what lay down there for her wasn’t enough to stop her; she could do this. It was the only way she would find her place. She sighed, rallying her courage, then climbed down into the wide crevasse. The heights didn’t bother her, not when she had once scaled the wreckage of Star Destroyers. The kybernite clawed into the flesh of her hand as she slowly made her way into the darkness. She could feel warmth... energy... surrounding her as if the cave was alive. The Force vibrated with different energy, and she realized that each of the millions of shimmering crystals lining the walls had its own energy.

There are so many. They all look beautiful. How will I know which one is the right one?

"Are you okay down there?” Finn called uneasily. He was the best friend anyone could ask for. He was always there when she needed it, looking out for her. She hoped he knew how important he was to her. She didn’t want her feelings for Kylo to change anything between them. He was the family she never had. Rey smiled up at him, scrunching her nose.

"I'm a scavenger, remember?"

As she climbed down farther, she started to hear it. Those whispers. The calling. She remembered it from Takodana and Ahch-To. She closed her eyes and followed the beckoning; the Force was guiding her again to her destiny. The same magnetism that drew her to Kylo now drew her farther into the cavern. She climbed deeper and deeper along the wall, drawn to the whispers that spoke to her soul.

What will I do once I find it? What color will it be? Will it be blue like Luke’s? What if it is red like Ben’s? What will I do? What will he do? I don’t even know how to make a lightsaber. I need his
help. Will he still help me like he promised?

She climbed deeper, following the summoning in her soul. In the dark of the crevasse, she could see something glowing, calling to her. She knew. It was on the opposite wall but just within her reach. It was small but beautiful, and under a ledge on its own. *It's mine.* It was perfect.

She held herself up by bracing her legs on either side of the wall, then worked quickly to dislodge her crystal from the ledge. Its energy flowed through her, warming her soul. If she ever believed in destiny, it was in that moment. As she pulled it out from the wall, the energy in the cavern changed.

"I found it!" She yelled up to her friends joyfully, but they didn't answer. She turned around to see if she could see their silhouettes illuminated against the sky but was distracted by loud shouts and blasterfire. She would recognize the sound of those mechanized voices anywhere. *The First Order.* Rose had trusted Kylo with their location, and he had come for them. He believed she hated him, he knew she had been hiding her connection to Sidious from him, and, though she feared what he would do, she had never imagined that he would do this. There were more shouts, and the rope that had secured her to the surface tumbled over the edge, slithering and curling in the lights as it fell past her with a whoosh into the darkness below. She lowered the barriers in her mind. *Ben, please don’t hurt them,* she begged through the bond.

The sound of ship engines from above drew her attention. As she stared up at the blinding Ilum sky, she expected to see Kylo’s ship flying overhead, but it was another ship. It wasn’t First Order or Resistance. The Force guided her to the truth. *The Hutts.* They began firing in the direction of the blasterfire. The resulting explosions vibrated through the cavern, breaking free a fine dust of snow from the walls. *They’ve come to protect us from the First Order.* The blasterfire and shouts faded away as the energy in the room changed. She turned at the sound of a shuddered breath to the wild eyes of her bondmate.

“Ben…”
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See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Blue, initiate wing tilt,” Kylo said as they entered the Ilum atmosphere. On radar, Kylo easily spotted the Millennium Falcon, set down near a large mining camp belonging to the First Order. They were blowing holes in the side of a precipice to access the immense crystals buried at its center. Only those crystals could be used for the superweapons of the First Order. He shook his head in disbelief.
How could she be so careless? How could she go to the same forsaken planet that supported First Order’s largest mining operation?

Dameron should have known better, and Rey’s friend should have heeded Kylo’s warning. There were hundreds of other planets in the galaxy with Kyber crystals. He would have given her the name of any of them if she had just asked. Did she not feel the presence of the First Order there? She should have known better. What did she think she would do after she got her crystal? How could she not have anticipated that the First Order would be patiently waiting for her, even after he told her that they could track that piece of junk? What concerned him most was that they hadn’t tracked it. His general had been enlightened by an informant who knew where she would be going.

Blasterfire on the ground caught his attention, and his blood was instantly alight in burning rage. Troopers from the mining camp had found her. He had warned Hux not to engage them, and those were not the blue bolts of rifles set to stun.

*I will kill Hux! I will tear his mind apart until he begs for death!*

His thoughts were interrupted by the infamous tug as the bond tightened between them. It seemed unnecessary when they were on the same planet again, another Force-forsaken ice planet, though he hoped this reunion would end differently than the last time he found her in the snow.

“Ben…” She was in darkness. He could feel the jagged edges of rocks cutting her hands and face as she grasped on to them.

*No, not rocks...crystals. She’s in the caves.*

Her eyes were wide with fear. “Call them off!”

He slammed his fist against the control panel in agitation. “I can’t! I have no command over them!”

“Yes, you do, you’re the –”

“Not anymore!” he snapped. After realizing she wasn’t the person he should be directing his
temper, he swallowed his anger. “I… I am not the Supreme Leader.”

“What?” She was being attacked by an army he could not control, but her voice was not angry, or fearful. It was full of hope. “Ben, did you leave?”

He didn’t know why her words created an ache in his chest. “I couldn’t stay. You were foolish enough to set down in the Order’s largest crystal mine. They tried to kill you with their autocannons; I had to destroy them. I’m entering Ilum’s atmosphere now.”

She, irritatingly, was more focused on him leaving. “You left the First Order?”

“Yes!”

“For good?”

“Well, they don’t take too kindly to defectors returning,” he muttered. Her smile almost made the whole mess worth it.

What did make the mess worth it was the way she looked at him with happiness and pride. The warmth he felt from her over the bond could warm the coldest heart. “What do we do?”

He checked the radar. Hux had still not sent a single TIE after him. He must have had faith in his troops on the ground. Still, there was an uneasiness building inside him. What other weapons could Hux possess? “First let’s find a way to get you out of there, now, before more troops arrive.”

“Ben, I found my crystal. I can be a true Jedi!”

You never needed a crystal or ancient books or Luke to be a Jedi, Rey; I don’t know why you can’t see that.

“You’ll have to show me when we get out of this,” he said, pausing long enough to appreciate how the word "we" sounded. It was simple yet consequential; it spoke of an after. “But right now, we need to get you out of there.”
“The Hutts are here to help us, too. I saw at least one ship; there could be more.” He checked his radar. That was odd, he didn’t see the presence of another ship. Something about it felt wrong to him.

*If the Hutts were the informants, then does the rest of the Resistance know she’s here?*

“I’ll keep an eye out for them,” he said vaguely. “Start climbing. I’ll fly low over the caves and take out as many of them as I can give you cover so you can get back to the *Falcon*.”

There was still a hesitance in her energy. “I’m not leaving without my friends.”

He closed his eyes and sighed. “I know.” He did know, and he would kill every last trooper in Hux’s army if that was what it took to keep them all safe. They would all go to the Unknown Regions. Together. “Look, Rey, I think I know what Hux is planning, if something goes wrong—”

“Nothing will go wrong,” she assured him. She hadn’t stopped smiling, even as he panicked to formulate a plan. “You did it, Ben; everything will be okay.”

He thought he would have struggled more with the implications of leaving his place of power in the organization he had believed in, but, then, he thought he would have struggled more with killing the creature he sacrificed everything for—and he did that without a second thought. It was surprisingly simple to give up the things he had thought were important to him when given the choice between them or her. He would always choose her.

But she was wrong; everything *wouldn’t* be okay. The warning in the Force came too late. His eyes flashed from hers down to the empty radar screen. *Impossible.* She seemed to sense something was terribly wrong the instant he did. Her smile gave way to fear. “Ben?”

He had been so distracted by his panic and thoughts of her that he hadn’t noticed the two other TIE fighters settle into attack formation behind him. By the time he sensed them, their weapons had fired. There was a split second of sickening realization when time crawled and the entire galaxy went silent. It was in that broken moment that he understood his fatal mistake.

*No... this is impossible... the deflector shield...*
He saw the bright flash before he heard the explosion. It was too late for heroics; their laser cannons had already done the necessary damage. The starboard wing exploded into a twisted ball of fire. He reached out instinctively, using the Force to hold the fighter together as best he could against the pressure of the atmosphere. The Silencer dove to the right and began a violent roll.

He couldn’t see her anymore, but he could hear her screams.

“Ben!”
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Kylo's ship is hit by an ion cannon and disabled
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“Ben!” she screamed into the darkness.

He was still suspended before her in the bond —flying somewhere above her rather than somewhere across the galaxy—but that overwhelming feeling of relief had been replaced by dread. Something was terribly wrong. His eyes were shut tight, his hair flying across his face as if his ship was…rolling. An orange glow illuminated his right side, and Blue screamed diagnostics in the background.

She struggled to hear him over the howling roar of the wind. *The wind.* It wasn’t the sound of the wind itself that made her stomach roll; it was what should have been there. The screech of the twin ion thrust arrays, the electronic beeps emanating from the soft white glow of the control panel, or the multiple system alarms that would be blaring if there was mechanical malfunction—all of it was missing. She shouldn’t have been able to hear the wind, especially not like that. It was Blue’s second announcement of the altitude that sealed her disquieting suspicions. They were descending, rapidly, but time had slowed to a crawl.

The orange glow… he had been hit, but by whom? The Resistance was on Dantooine, the Hutts were helping her, no one else was there but… the First Order. *It was Hux…* the realization bloomed across the bond. *No!* A conversation from the night Ben held her in his arms replayed in her mind.

*Think about it. If I defect from the First Order, it's abandonment; if I go to the Resistance, it’s treason. Any ship I take to get to you will be tracked, followed, and promptly shot down if they have no strategic forethought. Or, if they were resourceful, they would track me right to you and eliminate the entire Resistance right then and there.*

Another explosion rocked through the cavern as the Hutt ship sent a series of missiles into the slope above her. Kylo’s voice was in her head, begging her to run away. *Don’t wait for me,* he pleaded. She wasn’t naïve; she knew what he meant. He didn’t believe he would survive the crash. She watched helplessly as his ship spiraled toward the surface of Ilum, and all she could think was, *why didn’t I listen?*

It wasn’t the sound that caught her attention, it was the vibrating against her fingertips. The crystals sounded like millions of musical notes playing around her as they trembled. It would have
been beautiful had the implications not been ominous. *The whole cavern is moving.* A fine powder of dislodged snow fell around her into the darkness. She felt the deep rumbling before she heard it, but a tremendous roar swiftly rattled through the crevasse. She shivered. It sounded as if a monster the size of a light freighter was closing in on the caves. Panic tightened in her chest.

"Rey? You need to get back up here now!" Finn warned.

“Finn, you’re alright!”

"She's not going to make it!" Rose's voice echoed around her. The walls began to shake violently, and she grasped onto the side as best she could. Her fingers were slipping.

"Rey!!" Finn screamed, "Avalanche!" Her heart jumped. She felt into the Force. She could see the slope on the opposite side of the crevasse. A billowing cloud surged down the slope toward her. She realized in horror that it was an immense wall of snow. It was already too close. *The Hutts must have accidentally started an avalanche.* Would it hit her like a dust storm or a wave of water? Could she hold on to the side long enough to weather it? She knew she was too far from the bottom; she wouldn’t make it down in time. She knew she was too far from the top as well; if she didn’t make it to the surface before the avalanche reached her, it could knock her all the way back down. If she dug in and held on, it could be her only chance.

She planted her feet firmly and leaned against the wall as closely as possible. The crystals tore into her cheek and hands. She waited in the dark, trembling, her breath ragged and her heart pounding in her ears. As the rumbling became louder, the entire cavern quaked. She waited for the monster whose thunderous roar edged inescapably closer.

“Ben!” she screamed as it descended toward her. The light disappeared as the cascading wave of snow fell toward her. She waited in the blackness for the cold to consume her.

“Rey!”
Chapter End Notes

Fear of injury/death

Both Kylo and Rey are in perilous situations
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Blue was unharmed by the hit, and through his connection into the systems of the ship, he began
squealing out diagnostics. Kylo wondered briefly if droids feared their own death. He knew it was
dangerous; he shouldn’t have brought the astromech with him. He could have put him in a shuttle
and set him to orbit Ilum until the rescue was over. At least then he would have had a chance.
When Blue announced the readings, Kylo shouldn’t have surprised. The defense and weapons
systems had failed as they had before outside Taris. Blue repeated that the systems had been
remotely switched offline. His blood ran cold as the realization finally hit him. Remotely. The
entire computer system was connected to the Finalizer. It had never been a system malfunction. A
conversation with Hux just after the events on Crait replayed in his mind.

“The Finalizer has master control over the computer systems of our entire fleet. If one of our
destROYers attempts to commit mutiny, I can lower their shields and disable their internal
weapons and defense systems. They would be defenseless against our counterattack. Do not
underestimate me, Ren, I cannot be betrayed!”

It was Hux…

He had to give it to the man, his plan had worked perfectly. Hux had been patient, waiting for
Kylo to fail, and Kylo had failed spectacularly. He had killed his former master, and then blamed it
on her, and was foolish enough to believe he could protect her from the vengeance of the First
Order. He hadn’t destroyed Force Destiny, he had created the clones on Kamino, he had allowed
Hux to test his control over the Silencer outside Taris. He had come between Rey and the
Resistance, forcing her to leave them. He had kept her parents’ death from her, leading her to block
him out and not heed his warning about Ilum. He had renounced his title in front of the entire
bridge, handing it willingly to the man who would take his place. With his destruction of the
autocannons, he had provided Hux with enough cause to shoot him down without risking mutiny.
Hux had a puppet in power, Kylo out of the way and the location of the last hope of the Resistance.
Kylo had handed it all to him. In his attempt to protect her by staying, he had sealed their fate.

As the ship spiraled in a tight spin, Ben closed his eyes and grit his teeth, trying his best to weather
the gravitational forces that pulled him toward unconsciousness. He had to stay awake to warn
her. The Order is coming. Hux has a secret weapon and it’s all my fault. Run. Get as far away from
the Falcon as you can. Call for help from the Resistance. Don’t wait for me.

He was instantly consumed with terror. It wasn't his terror. It was hers. It was a deep, primal terror.

The tight spiral of his superiority fighter made it impossible to discern what danger she faced. He
found her side of the bond and dragged himself into her side of the connection, forcing away as
much from his side as possible. It was an off-balanced, unsteady feeling like the hologram
projections at SkyCenter Galleria amusement park he had seen with Lando once on Bespin. His
body told him he was spinning, but his eyes told him he wasn’t. It took him seconds longer to
realize that her side of the bond was vibrating too. A vibrating that was growing in intensity. A
loud roar was echoing down the cave walls. He felt her trembling and uneven breath. He knew
what was happening before he heard the word reverberate around him.

“Avalanche!” Her friends called for her, but she did not attempt to escape. She was trapped. His blood iced over as she waited for her fate. Her eyes stared overhead at the opening of the chasm. The light was eclipsed by a shadow of death, collapsing in on her.

“Ben!” she cried out for him. He reached out for her as her hand searched for his in the darkness. He grasped onto her hand and held on with everything in him. The impact crashed into him as it did her; the connection didn’t sever, but he was jolted back to his crippled ship. It was suffocating, crushing pressure, and he cried out into the emptiness of the fighter as she cried out into the emptiness of the cavern.

“Rey!” They were both falling, hand-in-hand, as a world of white spiraled around them. She was in peril; he couldn’t leave her now that she needed him. Kylo pulled hard on the yoke, struggling to regain lift in a fighter caught in an uncontrolled ‘death roll’ toward the surface of the planet. Logically, he knew it was uncorrectable. The wing had sustained too extensive damage. Even if he could miraculously fix it, there was no foreseeable approach to regain lift at that low level of an altitude. He couldn't even hope for a crash landing; he had no control.

Struggling to take deep, meditative breaths, he focused through tunnel vision on preserving his connection to the wing through the Force. It was nearly impossible to manipulate once they had entered the spin, and he knew if he lost his hold, he wouldn’t be able to get it back again. He screamed through the intensifying pressure in his legs from the gravitational forces, and she screamed his name through the darkness as a wall of snow dragged her to the cavern floor. He knew she needed him, but he was spinning in the opposite direction of the caves; not that it mattered, a crash from that altitude would be instantly fatal. His eyelids grew heavy as he accepted their dual fate. Darkness seeped into his vision until a familiar voice shouted in his mind, startling him into action.

*Use the Force!*

He could focus on her side of the connection or his, he could only choose to slow the descent of one of them, or at the very least try. He couldn’t stop her descent, as he fought to maintain consciousness, but in the last seconds, before they hit the ground, he could slow it. The strength of his control over the Force on her side of the connection could potentially be limited, but he released his hold over the remnants of the starboard wing anyway. As he released it, the wing was ripped away from the hull, tearing a hole in the fighter. The white crystalline terrain approached sickeningly fast in a dizzying glowing spiral, but he focused everything he had on slowing her descent. He braced for impact.

*Rey!*
Chapter End Notes

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"Rey!" Finn gasped as he dug his way back to the crevasse, pulling Rose along with him. The majority of the strength of the avalanche had been directed into the chasm toward Rey, while they absorbed the much weaker impact of the churning cloud. Finn had been able to quickly dig Rose out from under the light blanket of snow—finding her as if her heart carried a homing beacon. But the silence from Rey was deafening.

"Rey!" He screamed again from the edge, searching the white snow covering the bottom of the cavern for any signs of life. The snow swirled violently around them as they listened for her. Any sounds that may have been coming from the crevasse were drowned out by the rumbling of machinery and disembodied shouts coming somewhere from the direction of the avalanche.

Blasterfire burst past them, and Finn immediately began to return fire across the precipice. "It's the First Order! The avalanche didn't stop them!" Finn realized.

Rose raised her weapon, choosing to focus on defending the man she loved, rather focusing on the man who had likely betrayed her friend. He was the Supreme Leader. If the First Order was attacking them, it was because Kylo had ordered them to do so. Rey’s heart was the least of their worries when they were fighting for their lives. More troopers had joined the ones firing upon them, they were vastly outnumbered, and the flat terrain gave them little opportunity to hide. They could run, but that would require leaving their friend, and neither of them would do that. Fighting back until they killed every last trooper or Rey pulled herself out of the snow was their only option.

Where Rose’s shots were wild and panicked, Finn’s were calm, methodical, and frighteningly accurate. This was the fearsome killer trained by the First Order, she realized. Their only failure in his training was they had never turned his heart, instead creating the highly skilled warrior they now had to contend with. If they all would turn as Finn had, the First Order would fall. She heard blasterfire moving further down the drift and realized Finn was doing his best to draw fire away from her.

A bolt grazed her arm, and her weapon went flying out of her hands. She could almost sense the other bolt rocketing toward her—had she known more about the Force, she would assume that perception was what it felt like—unfortunately, it did nothing to quicken her reflexes. In one instant, she was frozen in terror from her impending realization, and the next she was crashing to the cold ground behind a snowbank. Finn’s heavy weight was sprawled on top of her, gasping for breath after he tackled her. His face was hidden in her neck, and his entire body shook violently.

"Finn!" she shouted. He was shuddering on top of her, and she feared that the bolt had struck him instead. She began searching his body for evidence of a wound. "No, Finn. Did it hit you?" She tried to push him off, for better access, but he only curled his arms around her tighter. "I need to see! Are you hurt?" His only response was a shake of his head against her throat. His breath was hot against her skin. When she lifted his head between her palms, his eyes were wet. "Finn?"

He shook his head, his chin trembling. "That could have… I can’t lose you, Rose." Even when she pulled back farther to ensure that he was unharmed, his arm wrapped around her back, holding her against him. "I can’t… I can’t lose either of you. I’m not strong enough.”

"You won’t," she promised. "We’ll save her." She knew that every moment they spent fighting the stormtroopers was another moment Rey was in danger. They didn’t have time to be careful, and she
couldn’t do anything to get down to that cavern without her blaster. A look of determination passed over her face before she took off in a sprint toward her discarded weapon.

“Rose!” He shouted after her, firing his weapon with a wide spray of suppressive fire. When she didn’t stop, he began shouting, “Shoot me! The traitor! I’m right here, shoot me!” Rose dove for her blaster, sliding through the snow. Once it was in her hands, she turned back toward Finn. He was still firing, standing on top of the snowbank, fully exposed to counter-fire. It wasn’t until she aimed her blaster across the vast abyss that her fear for him abated.

“Finn!” she shouted at him until he stopped firing. She stood staring at him expectantly as the winds whipped her hair across her face. “They’re gone.” His blaster dropped to the snow the second he realized she was right. They were no longer in danger; the First Order had retreated. The only question was why. He stormed across the ice toward her, his finger pointed accusingly. “Did you listen to what I said? I just told you I can’t….”

“Save Rey first; scold at me later.” Rose opened her comlink and walked to the edge of the cavern, staring down into the darkness. “Chewie…”

She could hear Finn grumble from somewhere behind her as he picked up his blaster, “Don’t think I’m letting this go.”
Chapter End Notes

Threat of injury

Finn and Rose are engaged in a gunfight
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Where am I?

Kylo couldn’t hear anything but a shrill ringing that didn’t seem to be coming from any direction in particular. He couldn’t see anything in the darkness that blanketed him. A quick search through the Force revealed a control panel before him. He was wet and cold and had no idea where he was or how he had gotten there. His weapon was not at his hip, but he could sense it nearby. There was no one else in the Force around him, which settled his unease slightly. Attempting to move, he felt a
safety harness compressing his chest.

*I'm in a fighter. The Silencer?*

Kylo had passed out from exhaustion once or twice on long journeys, only to be awoken by proximity alerts when he was supposed to drop out of lightspeed. It was usually a jarring experience, so he wasn’t too concerned as the fog from his mind cleared. It was the lack of alarms that made him study his surroundings more closely. If it was the *Silencer*, everything about it was all wrong.

There should have been visibly illuminated controls at his fingertips, the steady whine of the twin ion engines, and the hypnotic blur of stars in lightspeed. There was nothing but darkness and the steady drip of something splashing into a puddle. The safety harness was unusually tight, forcing his breaths into shallow pants, so he released the safety harnesses and immediately flew upward, striking his back. Pain shot from his right hip up to his shoulder when he hit the roof… and stayed there. Was the artificial gravity generator broken? *No*, he realized as he rolled over to his side.

*It's upside down.*

That realization, coupled with the injuries, left one likely scenario.

*I crashed.*

The unease returned, his mind fighting through a thick fog to remember what had happened. He tried to recall the last memory that hadn’t been affected, but there was nothing. He couldn’t remember what he had been doing, where he was, or if he was in danger. If he was in danger, he needed to move as far away from the wreckage as possible. Even if he wasn’t, he had no idea the condition of the ship or the starboard reactor. One thing was certain, staying in the wreckage was a good way to get himself killed, and dying wasn’t currently at the top of his list. His head throbbed, and he felt the overwhelming desire to sleep, but he knew time was against him already.

*How long was I unconscious?*

Sitting up, he began to understand the extent of his injuries. Searing heat radiated from his right shoulder. Sticky warmth matted his hair to his forehead, rolling down the right side of his face. He coughed, and there was a crippling pain in the right side of his chest that stole the strength from his body. He collapsed against the side of the fighter as he fought to breathe. It was worse than he had
thought.

There’s debris…

He slid his left hand from his shoulder down to his hip, searching until he felt the mangled end of a metal bar embedded in his upper chest and exiting through his lower torso. It had pierced through the reinforced material of his armored tunic, suggesting the ship had hit the ground with considerable velocity. This was no ordinary crash landing. He attempted to straighten, but the pain was too staggering to endure, even with aid of the Force. It was against every survival instinct he possessed, but he knew he had to remove the bar. He pulled at the exposed edge of the projectile, lifting the ribbed piece no more than a centimeter through the raw wound in his chest. He cried out in frustration as it refused to budge. He braced his right arm against the side of the wreckage and manipulated the Force to dislodge it, groaning through clenched teeth as he removed the bloodied bar. When the bar was free, he dropped it at his feet with a metallic clang, doubled over, panting through the agony.

With the object no longer embedded through the length of his upper body, there was a new clarity that created a frozen tingling in the back of his mind. There was something else, something he desperately needed to remember. Where had he been going? Where was he now—enemy territory or First Order? Why did he crash? Was he chasing someone, or was he shot down? Until he could remember otherwise, he had to assume the worst; that he was shot down behind enemy lines. There was something that twisted his stomach in dread. The Force, however, wasn’t screaming warnings of immediate danger. Something was terribly wrong, but what was it?

His head throbbed, his chest was on fire, and blood stung his eyes as it steadily trickled down his face. He searched for an answer in the darkness, but there was only an unsettling silence that had replaced the ringing in his ears. He summoned his lightsaber from somewhere in the wreckage and activated it. He didn't know why, but he knew that whatever it was, time was of the essence; it was a matter of life or death. A cursory search revealed no exits; he would have to cut himself out of the fighter. Even though it was armored to withstand laser cannon fire, with a little assistance from the Force, his lightsaber made quick work of the hull. An unforgiving frozen landscape revealed itself beyond the vessel.

What planet is this? Wherever it was, it was snowing. Of course; I hate snow.

He coughed as he pulled himself from the wreckage with his good arm, collapsing from the pain. His mind screamed for him to get up, but all he wanted to do was lie there; the frigid snow numbed his burning wounds. His wheezing breaths created puffs of warm fog rising from the frozen landscape, and he was tempted to close his eyes and drift away. Only the displaced sense of dread prevented him from succumbing to the desire of his heavy eyelids. He pushed himself to a stand with a groan and surveyed the blinding landscape. The twisted metal popped and cracked as the flames consumed parts of the mangled wreck. Snow swirled around his burning fighter, dulling the
throbbing ache of his forehead. *I didn’t crash, I was shot down,* he realized, as he noticed the burned hull and extensive damage to where the starboard wing had once been. He remembered flashes, fire, pressure, Blue….

“The Blue?” He called out into the wind. He circled the wreck, but the droid was nowhere to be found. “Blue!”

Vertigo overwhelmed him. He collapsed back into the snow as he waited for rescue. He had a suspicion that he had been unconscious inside the ship for longer than he had first anticipated, so there was no reason why the rest of the squadron hadn’t found him yet. Staring up through the snowflakes reminded him of hyperspace—something that usually calmed him—but the notion only served to increase the crashing of his heart against its cage, which wasn’t the smartest reaction, considering his injuries.

The snow began to spiral as it fell toward him, and a spark of a memory flashed through his mind. The snow spiraled around the cockpit the second before impact; he remembered screaming and paralyzing fear. He listened for the low hum of speeders or high whine of TIE fighters through the blizzard, but he heard the sounds of heavy machinery echo over the snow instead. He didn’t know how, but he knew it was the First Order; a mining camp. *Mining. The snow. It has to be Ilum.*

Kylo felt reawakening dread shiver up his back. He didn’t know why, but something in his mind told him to run. His intuition was not known to mislead him, at least when it involved danger, so he stood. He blinked in the blinding snow. It was impossible to see more than a few yards in any direction. Without an idea of where he was, or where he was going, he could quickly fall victim to hypothermia in the vast frozen landscape.

Only then did he realize the chill that had begun to shiver through him. He lifted his hood and wrapped his cloak and cowl more tightly around himself, rubbing his gloved palms together to keep warm as he formulated a plan. The urge to run grew steadily, but he had no idea what he would even be running from. There were no answers in the blinding white.

Common sense told him to wait by the fighter or inside it. Venturing out directionless into a snowstorm was certain death, but every cell in his body begged him to go. His intuition screamed that he was running out of time. He watched the blood from his hip drip into the white frost at his feet as he pondered his next move. It reminded him of the last time he was in the snow. He was on Starkiller, slamming his fist into his side, as he prepared to face FN-2187 and….

*Rey!* His scream of her name echoed in his mind, and with that name crumbled the dam withholding the flood of memories. The details of the crash emerged in terrifying clarity. He remembered deserting the First Order, their attempt to assassinate him when they shot his superiority fighter out of the sky, and the…avalanche. *Rey.*
Nausea gripped his throat as the landscape spun around him. The pain in his chest tightened until he was hyperventilating, panic saturating the Force around him. By the time he found her through the blizzard… His vision blurred, and shrill ringing replaced the sound of the howling wind around him. The deeper the terror rooted in his chest, the more he lost control. His consciousness was waning. *Rey needs you,* he reminded himself, trying to focus. They were running out of time, and he didn’t know how he would find her, but he refused to be too weak this time. He had failed everyone else, but he would not fail her—not when it meant her life.

Her friends had time to get out of the path of the avalanche; they could still reach her. For all their faults, he knew abandoning her would not be one of them. They would risk their own lives to save her, but could they find her underneath all of that snow? The Resistance did not carry transponders as the First Order did, and if she was buried, there was little she could do without the Force. He had seen troopers buried by accidental snowslides, though the search for them was more pretense than genuine attempt. From the few that were saved, he knew she had half an hour at best if she survived the impact. He searched for their bond in his mind, determined to use her energy as a beacon. His stomach dropped.

*Rey?*

The bond was nearly nonexistent. It was as if the connection they shared was broken, the band holding them together no longer taut and energized. Her presence was still in his mind, but it was dark. He felt nothing from her. *No.* He forced his way into her side of the bond, but there was not a single thought or emotion. *No!* The implication brought him to his knees. He gasped for air, his heart pounding in his ears, his emotions unraveling in the Force, and there was little he could do to contain it.

*No. She can’t...*

He closed his eyes and focused on her presence again. This time, he searched for her through the Force, trying to locate her energy on Ilum. There were only a few dozen people on the entire planet, and none of them had her familiar life source. *Nothing!* He panicked, grasping for any sign of her; but if she was alive, her life source was too weak for him to detect. *No, she’s alive. She has to be alive.* He knelt in the snow, staring helplessly into the swirling blizzard around him. He cried out, an agonized plea that finished with her name.

*How will I find you? How can I save you? Please, Rey.*

He pounded his fist into the wound near his hip, trying to suppress the emotional distress. The darkness flooded his system, fettering his chaotic emotions and providing him with the strength he
would need to find her. Pounding his fist into the chest wound this time, the violence forced him to cough up blood that splattered the snow in front of him. He grasped onto the stabbing pain while he gasped wheezing breaths. He drew strength from the pain, and, in turn, the darkness, forcing himself to stand. He closed his eyes.

Where are you, Rey?

Chapter End Notes

Graphic injury

Kylo grapples with the injuries sustained in a crash
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The climb down to the floor of the cavern took Finn and Rose longer than they had hoped. The descent with ropes was slow, and the cave stretched much farther down than they had originally thought. By the time their feet touched the cavern floor, Chewbacca had run through a blizzard from the Millennium Falcon and was only a few meters behind them. When asked how he could descend a cave wall so quickly, Rose caught ‘wroshyr trees’ and ‘Kashyyk’ in the limited Shyriiwook she understood. When they reached the bottom, they found it completely covered in
several meters of snow…and no sign of their friend.

"Rey!" Finn's voice echoed through the cavern. Chewbacca's howl reverberated off of the cave walls. They waited, listening for the faintest cry for help, but there was nothing. They all knew where she likely had fallen if she had been scaling the cave wall. Rose covered her mouth with her hand, Chewbacca whimpered, but Finn refused to imagine what befell his best friend. He wouldn’t leave that cave without her.

"What do we do? Where do we look?" Finn dropped onto the ground and began digging with his bare hands, searching blindly in an area large enough that it would take hours to find her by chance. Rose collapsed down a few meters away from him, searching, but it seemed more for his sake than anything else. The Wookiee was digging on the other side of her, his giant paws making faster work than either of them could. Still, there was a hopelessness settling over them, both Rose and Chewbacca glancing at Finn to see if he would come to the same conclusion they had. Finn refused to come to any conclusion except that his friend needed help. His fingers burned like they were on fire as he dug, the cold bit his lungs every time he drew in a breath, but the pain was meaningless compared to the ache in his chest every second that fell away without finding her.

"Rey!" He gasped. Finn begged for a sign from her, any clue that would direct him to where she was. Rey could be anywhere under their feet, and all of it looked like the last place he had randomly searched through. “Please, Rey,” he begged. “Say something!” The silence that answered back was sickening. He panicked, throwing snow around wildly, searching for any movement underneath. Part of him knew that the panicking wouldn’t help her, but he couldn’t stamp down the growing fear that gnawed away at him. What if they couldn’t find her? The First Order had left, likely believing they were dead, but what if they returned? He had shifted over several meters, when, for a reason unknown to him, he stopped.

Finn listened. The air around them had changed. It had grown even colder and... heavier. There was no steady crunch of boots in the snow to signal another presence in the cavern, but something prickled on the back of his neck, suggesting there was. It was the grave silence that sent a shiver down his spine. He glanced at Rose, whose stare was fixed over his shoulder. Finn’s eyes flashed to Chewbacca, who had his weapon raised to something behind Finn. He dared not turn around.

"Where is she?"

The deep voice cut through the deafening silence. Finn knew that voice. The last time he had heard it behind him, he was kneeling in the snow, just like this. He remembered the way “Traitor!” had echoed through the forest. He remembered the quick and powerful strikes, the burn of the crimson blade. He remembered those haunting eyes, wild and burning with bloodlust. He had been cradling an unconscious Rey back then; he would give anything to hold her safe in his arms now. As the labored breathing behind him moved closer, Finn slowly reached for the blaster under his jacket.
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Fear of injury/death

Finn searches for Rey
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"Where is she?"

Finn and Rose were on their knees, their backs to him. Chewbacca’s eyes pierced into his. The Wookiee’s weapon was leveled at Kylo’s chest. His side ached in phantom memory, remembering the impact from that bowcaster on Starkiller. He couldn't sense Rey at all, but he knew she was there somewhere. He knew he was running out of time if it wasn't already too late. *The traitor*
Predictably, the traitor turned and fired his blaster at him, as if he hadn’t been witness to the weapon’s ineffectiveness against Kylo before. It was disappointing; he thought the former trooper had better sense than that. While Kylo still avoided any danger, his connection to the Force was much weaker than he had anticipated. He froze the blaster bolts just long enough to move out of their path. The traitor’s impulsive attempt at an attack only served to further frustrate him. Kylo paralyzed him with a growl, panting from the exertion and blood loss. Rose’s hand moved to her blaster, but she didn’t raise it. Chewbacca didn’t lower his weapon, but he didn’t fire upon him, either.

"I'm here to help her!" he bellowed. "I was shot down...by the new Supreme Leader, trying to get to her...because you brought her to the largest First Order mining camp in the galaxy...and managed to lose her under several meters of snow at the bottom of the largest cavern you could find! So...if you're going to kill me, at least wait until she's safe!" The cavern was spinning. His breaths were shallow, every muscle tensed in his attempt to remain upright. Blinking to maintain consciousness, he knew he couldn’t hold the traitor in stasis much longer. He dropped to one knee in exhaustion.

"We don't have time," he gasped. "If you keep fighting me, I could waste more of my energy and her time on holding you there, or I could kill you; I haven't decided yet.” It was a lie; he had already decided if the former stormtrooper wasted any more time, standing between him and Rey, he would kill him and let her hate him later. Alive. "Or you move to those boulders in the corner so I can find her. I won't have the energy to save her if you fight me."

His eyes found Rose, appealing to her with a soft entreaty. "Please."

Kylo released the traitor from his grasp, gulping down air in an attempt to regain strength. The crippling pain radiated from the right side of his chest, and his legs quaked as he struggled to stand. Blood dripped from his fingertips onto the snow, the steady stream leading up to a deep laceration on his forehead. To his surprise, when he looked up, he saw that the three blurry figures had backed into the corner. He blinked until they became clearer.

"I shouldn't believe you after everything you've done," the traitor said. "But I do." The look in his eyes was still burning hatred, which was fine; Kylo didn’t much care for him either. Stumbling to the center of the cavern, he closed his eyes to concentrate in the Force. He dropped back down to his knees as he realized that standing was draining his strength. As evident as it was that he lacked a satisfactory plan, he knew he would need everything in him to save her, and he wasn’t going to waste it trying to stand. Reaching deep into the Force, he was met with the most exhilarating vibrations. It was the energy from the Kyber Crystals, powerful, profound, and all-encompassing.
It was unlike any energy he had ever felt before, even stronger than the lake on Chandrila.

Kylo would have been more drawn to the cave’s mysteries, had his mind not been singularly focused on his bondmate. The Force was bright as he searched the cavern for her energy, too bright. The feedback from the crystals made it impossible to pinpoint her. His connection to the Force was temporarily disrupted as he growled in frustration. He needed a new tactic; if he couldn’t use the Force to find her energy under all of that snow, then he would do the next best thing.

The dark, cold floor of the cavern illuminated in his mind’s eye, as he pushed deeper into the Force and felt the energy that flowed through every last drop of snow. He had never focused on manipulating millions of separate sources at once through their shatterpoints, but he had never been this determined, either. Connecting his energy to every last snowflake, he focused on sinking deeper into the Force, trusting it to guide him.

Kylo released more energy into the Force, and the snow started to vibrate. Gathering his control over an overwhelming quantity of sources, he forced their energy off of the ground, accelerating them all skyward. Each flake of snow swelled upwards, as if it were snowing from the cave floor. Kylo missed the whimsical display; his eyes were closed, scanning the floor with Force. With a jolt, he froze the particles mid-air. He had found her. Rey lay on her back with one of her arms across her face.

Rey!

"Rey!" the traitor screamed, jumping off the boulders to run to her.

"Stay where you are!” Kylo warned weakly. “Don’t touch her.” He held his breath as he stumbled to her. Kylo didn’t suffer with the Resistance’s delusions of a benevolent Force; he knew she had been under the snow for far too long. She wasn’t moving, and he couldn’t feel her. Still, he wouldn’t allow himself to consider the most likely outcome. Please, Rey. A sob escaped his throat as he knelt by her side. It was everything he feared. She was pale, her lips were blue, blood stained her grey jacket. He could hear her friends crying for her, but he didn’t want to touch her. He didn’t want to know.

Please don’t do this. He rocked on his knees, raking his hand through his blood-matted hair, as he tried to force himself to touch her. His hold over the snow particles wavered, so he released them all at once. They were non-threatening in their separation and slowed velocity, falling gently around them.
You have to be alive. I’m here, I found you. You have to be. Please.

He was uncertain if the tearing in his chest was due to the extent of his own injuries or the despair of seeing her in death’s grasp. His breathing was shallow and labored, his connection to the conscious world drifting in and out. His eyelids were heavy, but he wouldn’t give in, not until she was safe. He briefly considered Force Destiny, but that would require him to smuggle her back—in his weak condition—to the Finalizer after they had tried to kill him. The risk of interception was too great; that left only one way he knew to save her—if she was still alive. If she was gone….

Kylo reached for her cold hand. A shock of energy jolted through him as he touched her, and he gasped as if he had touched a faulty wire. Another sob shook his weakened body, this time a sob of relief. The pain dragged him back into consciousness. Their bond twitched slightly from the touch. He felt something he hadn’t felt too long—hope.

"She's alive!" He meant to shout it, but the result was more a hoarse whisper. Her friends held each other and cried in relief.

He pulled off his dark, heavy cowl, then his cloak. His injured shoulder screamed in protest as he gently wrapped the heavy material around her, gathering her possessively into his lap. The cold bit fiercely at his wounds, but he knew it would numb the pain as the hypothermia set in. The snow still fell steadily around them, and he realized it would only hinder his attempts to save her. With all the strength he could muster, he lifted her into his arms and stood, cradling her to his chest with his left arm. He threw a warning glare at her friends and staggered to the nearest tunnel away from the risk of exposure to the snow.

It did not escape him that the last time he held her like this—unconscious and limp in his arms—had been the first time they met on Takodana. He had never imagined everything that would change between them – because everything truly had changed – but he refused to let this be the end. At least, not for her. Finding an alcove in the crystal-lined tunnel, he set her down on the cloak, her limp body wrapped tightly in the cowl.

He collapsed in a heap next to her. Slowly removing his gloves, he shuddered, remembering the first time he had done that in the hut. He wished he had left then, or in the throne room, or any of the countless times she begged him to see it wasn’t too late. Was it too late now? Had he lost her? Closing his eyes again, he descended deep into the Force. The energy projected by the crystals was intense, it jolted around him like lightning, but he could see her familiar energy.

Kylo found her, but her life source was nearly nonexistent; he could barely sense her weakening heartbeat. His knowledge of healing was limited, but he knew the most important rule; lifeforce for lifeforce. One could only transfer the amount of lifeforce into another as they had left to give. Not even the strongest of Jedi could transfer enough lifeforce to those whose lifeforce had already been
drained completely. He hadn’t been lying to Rey in the jungle; without an unnatural machine like *Force Destiny*, there was no healing of death.

*Stay with me. I can’t help you if you give up, even for a second.*

He could see through his mind's eye all the injuries the avalanche had caused. Her broken and fractured ribs had both sustained and caused the most damage. He may have slowed her descent enough for the impact not to be immediately fatal, but the fall had still broken most of the major bones in her body. Then the crushing weight of the snow had forced those pieces of bone into vital organs, including her lungs.

The snow was the only reason she was alive, however. It applied the necessary pressure and slowed her heart rate enough to delay her from bleeding out. If she could have only seen the irony; what was slowly killing her had also kept her alive long enough for him to find her. His only question was how she survived for that amount of time without oxygen. It was a question he would have to ask her…after he saved her. His knowledge of Force healing was limited to what Dev had taught him. Oh, how he wished he had been more focused on their lessons. He hadn’t been strong enough to save Dev, but he *would* save her. He had never healed wounds this extensive, but he knew what he had to do. It was no different than when he healed her hand in the refresher – theoretically.

Without a second thought, he found the embers of hope in his chest, opening himself fully to the light side of the Force. It was the first time since he fell to the dark that he had actively opened himself to it at its full intensity, not merely succumbing to the call of the light, but drawing it inside himself, driving out the darkness. The depth and concentration of it was nearly painful after being without it for so long.

Parts of him he long ago believed had withered and died away reemerged with fervency. He imagined it as a lifeless, shriveled plant, finally exposed to the rays of the sun. It was like removing a blindfold he had worn for so long. He had forgotten what it was like to see. It was both overwhelming and soothing. It was unsustainable for him at such an intensity, but he only needed it long enough to save her.

*I’m not very good at this,* he broadcast his thoughts out into the Force. *I need all the help I can get to save her. Please, if...anyone...is out there, for her, I need your guidance more than ever. Can anyone hear me? She needs your help. I can’t... I can’t do this alone. Mother? L...Luke? Dev? Anyone? Please help me save her. I’ll never ask for anything ever again. Please.*

He waited, but no one answered. No one had ever answered; not when he begged the Force to save him from Luke, not even his grandfather all those years he asked him to show him the way. Kylo had always been forced to do it on his own. He would do it again.
Kylo slipped his fingers under her layers of clothes, resting his palms over her open wounds. Her life bled into his hands. Panic stole the breath from his lips as he realized that he hadn't sensed the slightest twitch of pain through their bond.

*I feel nothing. Nothing! She is beyond sensing pain. Am I too late? Is she too far gone? No! Don't think like that. Don't give up on her. She's alive; there's still hope.*

“You didn’t send the First Order here, did you?” Rose asked, kneeling hesitantly next to him. He hadn’t noticed that they had both joined him at her side. He didn’t have the will to care anymore.

“No.”

“You tried to stop them?” He didn’t answer, but Rose nodded as if he did. "What are you doing?"

"She's dying," he choked, not realizing until that moment how real the words would make his risk of losing her until he said it aloud. What if he failed, like he failed at everything? "I have to try to heal her...with the Force."

"You can do that?" Her voice was pleading with him, begging him to tell her that everything would be all right. He could have lied to her. He didn’t.

"I...I don't know. I know it has been done...by very powerful Jedi. I am neither a powerful Jedi, nor was my training or knowledge focused on healing. I had one lesson, and I read about something like it in a book a long time ago. It’s not just using energy to heal, it is the transfer of my lifeforce to her. I can only give her what I have left. I'm barely strong enough to stay conscious right now. I don't know if I can do it... we have our bond on my side, and I promise I won't give up on her. I will save her or die trying." Rose nodded through her tears. He wished he could offer her more.

"Because you love her," the traitor… Finn, she had called him Finn, who had been silent until now, finally realized, tears rolling down his face as he looked at Rey.

Love? Love is a delusion. No, I don’t love her. What this is can’t... it can’t be love. Love is conditional, and there is nothing in this galaxy that can make even the deepest, darkest part of me anything but hers. This can’t be something that anyone else in the galaxy has ever felt, because their soul isn’t connected to another person as I am to her. Either this is something greater than love or no one else truly knows what love is. What I do know is she is everything to me. My soul
feels whole when I’m around her. I only want her happiness, even if that means we can’t be together, because she deserves the galaxy. Being around her makes me want to be the man she sees in me, even if I know that man is dead. And I will gladly give up anything, including my life, so she can live. Whatever that is called, that is what will give me the strength to do this. That is why I cannot fail. That is why I promise I will never give up on her.

He tried to shake the thoughts of his devotion to her from his mind, because it made the idea of living without her impossible. “Please save her,” Finn begged, his voice heavy with despair. Kylo understood; it mirrored the same emotion tearing him apart inside.

I don’t understand. I need help. I don’t know what to do. I feel so alone. Why has there been no one to help me like there was for Skywalker? Why is there no one here to help her? With a Force filled with so many powerful Jedi, why are you all so silent? Why would you leave her life in my hands?

"I need to concentrate to do this," his voice barely above a whisper. "I need quiet...and space."

Rey’s friends silently complied, moving behind him. Kylo attempted to slow his labored breathing, exhaling against the sharp pain in his chest. He stole one last glance at Rey's beautiful face, his own tear falling down her cheek, then closed his eyes. With practiced concentration, he fell deep into the lowest levels of the Force. Focusing on the intensity of the light, he allowed the wall of emotions built up inside of him to fall away into the Force. The hatred, the anger, the guilt, the pain, the passion, and the devotion flowed out his fingertips as he accepted the energy that flowed all around him. The Force flowed into him until he had become the vessel through which it could impose its will. He was open and vulnerable, but he didn't care.

With his singular determination and will, he dropped to levels he had never touched before. He felt every particle of every single being inside that cavern; his energy flowed and spiraled with the energy of everything that was around him. It was the closest, he supposed, to death in the Force. He searched for the knowledge, trapped in his unconscious memories, that he had read in a book and learned from his friend so long ago. Concentrating on the energy around him, he found his own life source, weak but flowing slowly through his body.

Kylo saw in his mind's eye for the first time the extent of the damage from his crash. He saw the wounds to his right shoulder and chest, then realized with hopeless resolution the severity of the injury to his head. It’s too late. I’m too weak. I don't know how I'll have enough energy to save her. That’s the story of my life...never strong enough. I can’t....

No, he would. He would save her. There was no other acceptable outcome. If it was the last thing he ever did, which it likely would be, then he would find the strength to do it. And it all would have been worth it – every single second of failure and loss and torment in his life – if he succeeded with this.
With the light surrounding him, he focused his lifesource through his fingertips, pushing it into her lifesource as it trickled away. He felt his own life slowly start to drain as he concentrated on the wound that was stealing the life from her body. Her own loss slowed, the blood coagulating under his fingers. He forcefully willed the living energy to regenerate each tiny cell that had been destroyed, imagining time being rewound. There was no resistance from her as he gave everything within himself to her.

His wounds burned straight through to his soul, overcome by the absence of the strength he was pouring into her. His body shook violently as his mind passed in and out of consciousness; he remembered how frighteningly close he had been to death after Concordia. He knew not to underestimate that exhaustion again. His thoughts drifted to the brightness of her face when her eyes smiled, but he focused his mind back before he lost consciousness.

You can let go when she's safe.

The blood from his head wound dripped onto her grey jacket. Every single cell in his own body violently screamed in protest, begging for its own self-preservation. He could feel his body shutting down. There was a moment he believed he wouldn’t make it, as the energy quickly drained away. Just as he started to lose the battle, he felt the energy swarming around him from the crystals absorb into his body, giving him enough strength to stay conscious. If he hadn’t been so focused, he would have wondered if there were others there in the Force with him.

I'm sorry, Rey. I'm so sorry. This is all my fault. I should have been here sooner. If I had left the First Order...then you would be lying in my arms, sleeping in a warm bed—not dying at the bottom of a cold, dark cavern. I could have told you how much you mean to me. I could have told you that you were right—about me, about everything. I wish I could go back and fix all of this. I'm sorry. Please, come back to me. Please, Rey!

Reaching further out into the Force, drawing the bright energy from all around him, he tried to buy himself enough time to save her before his body gave up on him. The bitter cold stole his breath and escaped in a mist from his lips. He knew he was reaching the end, because the pain faded, time slowed, and his senses dulled.

Fighting every instinct to just lie down and close his eyes, he found the struggle comforting in its familiarity. Kylo had always imagined his death in the heat of battle, finally bested by someone truly better than him. He thought he would welcome a final cessation of the pain, but now he feared it. If he could just save her, he couldn't imagine a better death than leaving this life holding her.
If she lives, it was all worth it.

His life flowed through her, down its path to restoration. Then he felt something he had been craving to feel since he dragged himself out of that wreckage. He felt a sharp pain. Her pain. Pain was good. Pain was the best feeling in the universe, because pain meant that she was alive. He felt her heartbeat grow stronger and her breathing regulate. The blue faded from her lips. The energy flowing from his fingertips slowed, but he willed it to continue.

No, we're too close to fail now. She will live!

The Force abandoned him in his weakness as his connection to meditation wavered. No longer an empty vessel guided by its will, he was fighting a losing battle. His body shook violently as he tried to muster the strength to give her every last bit of energy he had. Kylo felt momentarily euphoric; he could feel no more pain from her or himself, and he reveled in the perfect energy around him. The darkness consumed him, but it was different now. It was not the darkness of the Force, but the darkness of mortality. It was calming and right. A numbness spread through him, and he lost the connection to the energy around him. He realized it was over; he wasn't strong enough, and he had nothing left to give. With one last thought, he collapsed.

Rey, I'm sorry.
Chapter End Notes

Injury

Rey sustains life-threatening injuries

Threat of death

Kylo decides to risk his life to save Rey
Finn's Choice

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes
Finn had watched in desperate silence, hand grasped tightly to Rose, as Kylo closed his eyes and pressed his hands against the wound on Rey’s abdomen. Nothing happened. It seemed endless, how long he remained in that position, weakening but focused.

All Finn heard was Kylo’s slow, shallow breathing as it had become increasingly labored. The former Supreme Leader swayed occasionally, as if he were losing consciousness, but then he pulled himself straight again. Finn felt a heaviness in the air around them, but nothing suggested that the man’s effort was successful. At the end, his body shook violently, and Rose almost stepped in to end the torture, but Finn held her back. There were no mystical lights or glowing auras that signaled that anything he did could save her, but hope was all they had. If Kylo was willing to forfeit his life in an attempt to save hers, Finn would let him.

When Kylo showed signs of succumbing to his weakness, Finn feared Kylo had failed, but then warmth replaced the ghastly pallid tone of her skin. Pink returned to her reposed lips. The comforting mist of her breath puffed faintly in the frigid air. As life returned to her face, Kylo’s condition worsened, but he remained steadfast in his promise until he was too weak to continue.

His last moments were a violent struggle to give her everything he had. Rose refused to watch. It was even difficult for Finn; it was almost a relief when Kylo gasped and finally collapsed backward into the snow. Chewbacca let out a frightening cry. Finn rushed to Rey's side, checking her wounds. He pulled up her jacket, but the only sign of the wounds under the blood that soaked her shirt was three raised, pink scars.

Rose stared wide-eyed. “They’re all gone!”

"She's freezing. We have to get her back the Millennium Falcon," Finn said, gently scooping Rey from where she lay beside Kylo, and moving back to the ropes they had secured. It wasn’t until he left the tunnel that he realized Rose and Chewbacca were not following him.

"Rose, come on, let's go," he demanded frantically. Rey was alive, he wouldn’t lose her now.
When he turned to explain that to his fiancée, he found her face twisted in sorrow. “We can't just leave him here, Finn!” Chewbacca growled at him. He didn't speak whatever language a Wookiee spoke, but his tone sounded like he was in agreement.

"He's dead. You heard him; he was planning on giving up his life to save hers. If he's not dead, he will be soon. What do you want me to do, end his misery?"

Rose stared at him with a look of disappointment that ached in his chest. “Who are you? Because you're not the Finn I know. The Finn I know would be finding a way to get all of us out of this giant hole, especially the man that just saved his best friend's life,” Rose said through tears.

She knelt at Kylo's side and checked for a pulse. "He's still alive—barely—which means he has a chance." Delicately, she pushed Kylo’s hair from his forehead and Finn hated that she wouldn’t make this easy for him. If he left that man behind, he wouldn’t have to face the truth about him. “She loves him, Finn. Don’t we owe it to them both to give him a chance to live through this?"

Finn paced impatiently, then carefully handed Rey to Chewbacca. He knelt by Rose's side. “Rose, he's still the enemy,” he insisted. “Remember that thing I didn't tell you? I had direct orders from Poe to assassinate him. Think of the Resistance, Rose. What would your sister have done? I think she would tell you the fate of the Resistance is worth more than one man’s life. He's doing us all a favor by going this way. If we take him back with us, you know what they’ll do to him. He can’t go back to the First Order, they tried to kill him, too. It’s better this way; he had the chance to save her life before he died, so he will at least be remembered for something good. You and I both know that we don’t have the supplies to save him and no one out there in the galaxy will help us save the former Supreme Leader. If you want me to end his suffering for him, just go wait by Chewbacca; I'll take care of it.” Rose shook her head in defiance, but after a moment, she seemed to accept Finn's resolve. She gently stroked Kylo’s cheek, whispered something that wasn’t meant for Finn’s ears, then walked to Chewbacca without looking back.

There was a heaviness in the air around Finn, something charged and stifling. He glanced nervously at the crystals. What was this place?

Finn stood over his old foe and steadied the blaster. The blood from Kylo's wound already covered half his face. Even still, he barely recognized the man as the monster who had nearly killed him on Starkiller. He looked peaceful. “What does she see in you…?” he whispered. He gulped, trying to gain the courage to pull the trigger. He heard Rose sobbing and Chewbacca whimpering behind him. They had both wanted this man dead before. He had watched the Wookiee try to kill him on Starkiller; what had changed?

He braced himself, the weapon poised right above Kylo’s left temple...but he couldn't shake the thought of what Rey's face would look like when he told her what he had done. He readjusted his
grip on the weapon and licked his lips. He could do this...he had to do this...for the Resistance.

"Forgive me," he whispered, though he didn't know whether he was asking the forgiveness of Rey or Kylo, and he turned his face away so he wouldn't have to see the damage the blaster bolt would do.

"Rey..." It was the faintest whisper, on the softest exhale, but he was sure he heard it. Kylo was desperately trying to hold on. Finn closed his eyes.

The image of Kylo and Rey in her bed that night consumed his thoughts. Part of him had expected it after she revealed she had gone to the Finalizer to save him. Due to the heated physicality of their relationship and Kylo’s ability to manipulate her, he envisioned the worst scenario was a regrettable moment of passion. He had never anticipated romance. He remembered it clearly: they were wrapped in a tender embrace, Kylo was uncharacteristically gentle, and she was unexpectedly trusting. They seemed like imposters of their true selves. Their eyes were locked in a vulnerable and reverent stare. He may not have wanted to admit it then, but it was unmistakable now—they were in love. That realization left him as the wielder of a terrible secret; Rey loved Kylo, and he loved her in return. Kylo’s imminent death would tragically prevent his best friend from knowing the truth, because it was not Finn’s secret to tell.

Maybe that was why he couldn’t pull the trigger that night in her room. Nor could he do it in a moment of inevitability, standing at the bottom of a frozen cavern as his blaster hovered over the dying man’s temple. It was not his love to end. He sighed in acceptance. When he opened his eyes, his choice didn’t matter anymore.

Kylo was gone.
Chapter End Notes

Threat of violence

Finn considers killing Kylo
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"Sir, the *Silencer* is confirmed down," the officer informed the new Supreme Leader.

“Are you sure?” the Knight rumbled through the vocoder.

Hux smiled, turning to the Knight. “I never thought it would be that easy to kill him.”

“Yes, sir,” the officer confirmed. “And we have located the freighter; several squads have been dispatched to intercept them.”

“The orders are to surround their ship and prevent their departure. They are not to engage or interfere with the hostages at all, especially the Jedi. I’ll take care of the rest.”

"Yes, sir,” the officer nodded obediently.

“Send for the other Knights,” the Supreme Leader commanded. “We will locate the downed fighter. I want to ensure that the problem has been eliminated. We can dispatch him if necessary.”

Hux stared out the viewport at the frozen world. “And bring the girl to me.”

The Knight nodded once in agreement.

Hux turned to face the viewport, smiling in satisfaction. “It is all coming together perfectly, my liege.”

Another officer rounded the corner of the corridor and hurriedly addressed the commanding
“Sir, your attention is required on the Command Bridge. Several ships have been registered in close proximity on RADAR.”
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Rey opened her eyes to a blurry face staring over her. She blinked, trying to clear her vision. She didn't remember where she was, how she got there, or why she was there. All she knew is that she desperately wanted him.

"Ben?" she groaned weakly. Another face appeared, but their voices seemed so far away. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the bright lights. She was inside the Millennium Falcon. Finn smiled down at her, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Rose grasped her hand tightly.

“Rey, it's Rose,” she said. “Can you hear me?” Rey nodded drowsily. “I want you to stay lying down while we finish the Bacta injections, ok? We need to slowly warm you back up.”

Rey struggled to form words past the tightness of her throat. "What happened?"

"Do you remember climbing down into that cave to find your crystal?" Finn asked, "There was an avalanche...."

The fear...the crushing sensation of the snow on top of her...the excruciating pain in her chest... it all came flooding back to her. She instinctively reached down for the wounds, but where she expected to feel a Bacta patch, all she felt was dried blood and raised scars. Rose saw the confusion on her face, and tears began pooling in her eyes. She looked at Finn.

*Something’s wrong. What doesn't she want to tell me?*

Rey was terrified, and she didn't know why.

"Ben..." Rose’s voice broke. Rey searched her friend’s eyes for the truth, and it only served to terrify her further. *What about him? What about him, Rose?* Rey's heart beat wildly as she turned her attention to Finn. His expression was grim. She sat up in fear, and then she noticed it—the black cowl draped over her.
She instinctively reached out to him in the Force, often a sense of reassurance and comfort to her, but something was wrong. It was as if he were shutting her out. The bond was there, but everything that made him Kylo was not. He was gone. She tried again...and again. There was nothing.

“What happened? Where is he?”

Her stomach filled with dread; her breath caught in her throat. She watched Rose's eyes plead with Finn to tell her, but he shook his head. His eyes were glossy as he looked at her sympathetically. No.... She no longer wanted to know. She had the urge to run. She would keep running as far away as she could get so she didn't have to hear what they were going to tell her.

"Rey, he..."

"Don't!" Rey pleaded, tears blurring her vision. She felt trapped. Finn and Rose knelt hovered over her, crowding her with their concern. The pressure building in her chest squeezed the breath from her lungs; the room felt as if it were collapsing in on them. "I can't breathe."

She shut her eyes tightly, imagining she was back in his bed with him, feeling nothing but the warmth of his body. He smiled, but his eyes were full of sorrow. She reached out for him again in their bond...in hope...in denial...but there was nothing. Rose gently brushed the hair from Rey's face. Rey opened her eyes and immediately regretted it. The pained sympathy in their eyes pierced her heart.

"Somehow...he knew something horrible had happened to you, Rey. He came for you," Finn explained, "He saved your life."

"I don't understand," she cried, wrapping his cloak around herself in comfort. "What happened? Where is he?"

"He came for you Rey, but the new Supreme Leader shot his fighter down. He suffered...serious...injuries," Rose paused, trying to remain strong for her friend. "He was weak, but he was determined to save you. He lifted the snow off you, and it was magical. He found you, but you'd been under the snow for so long," Rose paused, breathing deeply to suppress the emotions threatening to steal her voice.
“Where is he!?” Rey demanded.

*Just say it.*

“He said he had to heal you with the Force,” Finn continued hoarsely. Rose glanced at him and grinned sadly with gratitude. “He said that whatever he had to do would take everything he had in him. All he cared about was saving your life...but he knew the cost. He said the only way he could save you was if he...”

“No....”

*Please don’t say it.*

“When he was done, he collapsed, and then he disappeared, just like Leia did. I’m sorry Rey, he’s gone.” Rey shook her head. Her brow furrowed and her lip quivered.

*No! This isn't right! This isn't how his story is supposed to end. We're supposed to be together! Our destinies are intertwined! This can't be real. Ben can't die.*

She shoved them away with the Force and stood. “Rey, wait!” Finn pleaded. She turned to run...somewhere...anywhere. She couldn't stand to hear another word; she couldn’t breathe. Nothing made sense, she had to be alone. She fled the room and rounded a corner before she collapsed. There was no strength left, she let go. She sobbed between gasps, her body weak as she rocked on her hands and knees.

*I don’t understand. He can’t be gone. The bond is still there. That has to mean something. There has to be hope.* Grasping desperately at the remnants of their bond, she searched for his energy in hysterics.

*Where are you, Ben?* she begged, willing the thought into their bond.

The Force answered with a crackling of energy. When she saw the streaks of blue surrounding his energy in the Force, she remembered the blue aura that had surrounded Luke. A sob rocked her body as she tried to come to the acceptance that he wasn’t across the galaxy, safe on the *Finalizer.*
But as his reposed form appeared in front of her, she saw his droid pacing next to him, a small blue flame extended from his utility arm in the hopeless attempt to keep his master warm. Blue turned to her and begged her to help him – like last time.

Only then did Rey understand that the streaks of blue were not caused by his phantom energy in the Force, but by the indigo hues of the sunset reflecting off the snow around him. Realization churned in her stomach—he had never been in the cavern; he disappeared because he had found her through the Force bond. That meant Kylo was still on Ilum.

But where?

Rey searched his surroundings for a clue to his location. Her fallen bondmate lay peacefully in a snowbank next to a wrecked fighter. The wind tousled his hair, snowflakes dusting his dark clothing in a light blanket. Everything else around him was a blinding white.

“Ben?”

“Ben, wake up.” Her mind was gripped by a heavy fog as she crawled to him. She absently brushed a piece of his hair behind his ear and stifled a sob. His hair was matted with blood from a deep wound on his head. She traced the scar down his cheek, the only ounce of familiarity about him. For the first time, his face was completely devoid of expression. His skin was sickeningly pale and ashen. Her tears landed and rolled down his face, but he remained unresponsive. Was he even alive?

Her hope was fracturing under the weight of her fear. Her fingers trembled as she prepared herself for the real possibility, but she couldn’t bring herself to know for certain. The absence of his energy in the bond felt like a black hole sucking all her emotions away until she felt... nothing. She replayed every conversation in her head, imagining the ways it could have gone differently. Her words to him after she learned of his knowledge of Dantooine tore through her mind, tightening in her chest. Her heart begged for him in the same way a dying man gasped hopelessly for air. “I’m sorry,” she cried. “I’m so sorry, Ben.”

She heard heavy footsteps approach her. Chewbacca whined, crouching down on the other side of him. The Wookiee tenderly inspected his wounds.

“I found him in our bond,” Rey replied absently. She gazed longingly down on Kylo’s face. She remembered every expression, every twitch of emotion that flashed through his eyes. She ran her fingers lightly over his lips. Painful memories flooded her thoughts of the moments she felt the longing to kiss those lips. Now, she feared she would never have the chance. Those memories
seemed like a lifetime ago as she knelt beside him, remembering what was and grieving what would never be. The tiniest sensation touched the tip of her finger and she gasped, her entire body shuddering in anticipation as she waited to feel the sensation again.

*breath*

"Bring me every last medical supply we have on board," Rey whispered.

*He's alive. Just barely, but he’s alive. That's all that matters. There's hope.*
Chapter End Notes

Fear of death

Rey fears that Kylo is dead/dying
Battle Begins

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
One after another, Resistance starfighters appeared out of hyperspace in view of the massive destroyer. It was lurking exactly where they thought it would, just outside the atmosphere of the planet Ilum. Beebee-Ate confirmed what he already knew—it was the Finalizer.

Poe Dameron was quiet as he scanned the daunting ship to create a tactical plan. He was never one for strategy, but he knew that wouldn’t work for this battle. The First Order had taken the bait and fallen right into their trap, but they had arrived much earlier than expected. They should only have received word from the surface a few hours before the Resistance showed, giving the Alliance time to arrange the perfect ambush. How had the Finalizer already arrived? It would add complications, the most critical one being the protection of his friends on the ground. If Kylo Ren had already taken his shuttle to the surface, the others would be at his mercy until the Hutts arrived.

“Go straight at ‘em?” Lieutenant Connix joked.

“No,” Poe decided. “We wait here, and hope they send their TIE fighters. We take out as many as we can in a dogfight out of range of their defense cannons.”

“What about the Finalizer?” another pilot asked over the comms.

“They have over 1500 turbolasers and Ion cannons. We need the cover fire of cruisers and freighters before we attempt to systematically eliminate their defense systems.”

“Copy that, Black Leader.”

“Where are the other Alliance ships? Where are the Hutts?” Connix asked.

“They’ll be here,” he assured them.

Just as he had hoped, a black wave of TIE fighters rolled out of the port hanger, heading directly to their position.
“And here comes the parade.”

Poe smiled.
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“*Millennium Falcon*, this is Black Leader.” A voice broke the silence over the comlink. Finn was sitting in the cockpit alone, he knew he had to answer it. He dried his tears and cleared his throat.

“Go ahead, Poe,” his voice wavered as he spoke.

“Finn! Buddy! Any sign of Kylo Ren?” Poe asked casually, as if it were no more consequential than asking about their flight. But the subject weighed heavily on Finn’s mind. He had the chance to kill Kylo, but he had made the choice to spare him, and they were squandering every last medical supply on board to save the man who had saved Finn’s best friend. And whom his best friend loved. How could he explain that to Poe? How could he let him down? He was caught between the two people he cared about most—and his moral compass was on Rey’s side.

“No,” Finn choked. “Nothing.” He stifled a sob and dropped his head into his hands. When did war become so complicated?

“Well, keep an eye out. The *Finalizer* is outside of the Ilum atmosphere, and we have just engaged them. We will initiate our strike once the rest of the alliance arrives. With any luck, we end the war here and now.”

Finn was going to answer his friend, but he was distracted. Another voice was hailing him. It was the *Millennium Falcon*’s Master Comms.

Dread sank in his stomach.
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See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Medical wrappers and empty injectors littered the floor surrounding Rey. Rose entered the room with blankets in her arms. Her face was pale and her expression grim. She handed a light grey blanket to Rey. She recognized it immediately.

*The blanket from the vision...*

“No that one,” Rey insisted, choosing a heavy blanket, and a darker therma-blanket instead. She
had cut his blood-soaked tunic from his body to dress his wounds. At that point, she figured it was more of a detriment to heat retention anyway. She wrapped him in one warm blanket and then tucked the therma-blanket around him, knowing it was only a temporary solution. If she didn’t find him, he wouldn’t last long in that weather. She was running out of time.

Staring down at her bond mate, she tried to remain strong. A bacta patch covered the right side of his forehead. She wiped a warm cloth over his blood-stained face. She had tried to clean him as gently as she could, but there was still dried blood in his eyebrows and eyelashes. Fresh snowflakes melted on his cheeks. His condition was deteriorating with the weather. He was covered in bacta patches but she sensed his pulse steadily declining. She had been given hope and then it had been slowly, excruciatingly, being stolen away again.

*Please, Ben, please don't leave me alone.*

"There has to be something more we can do," Rey said to her friend, without glancing away from her bondmate.

"We don't have a bacta suit on board," Rose answered. “All we had was these patches and injectors. It's just not enough. He should have died in that cave...but I think he's been holding on... waiting for you.”

"No! I won't watch him die! We need to get him to a bacta suit! Tell Chewie to fire up the engines!"

Rose sighed. “Rey, there's more that you don't know. I didn’t want to burden you while Ben… We can't take off. Finn just told me that several squads of Stormtroopers have us surrounded. They told him over the comlink that if we make any attempt to take off, they have the cannons to shoot us down. They still haven't attempted to board. They are holding us hostage until the new Supreme Leader comes to take us back to the *Finalizer*. There's still hope, though. We heard on the comlink Poe gave us that the allied forces are about to launch an attack on the *Finalizer*, which was waiting for us right outside the atmosphere the whole time. We just have to wait it out and hope that Poe can pull off a miracle. "

"So... what? I just sit here, and watch him die? He’s out there somewhere in a blizzard, Rose! Leaving him there is certain death!” Rey shouted. She immediately regretted it. She wasn't angry at Rose.

"I'm so sorry," Rose whispered in a wavering voice.
“Please, just go.” Rey didn’t watch her friend walk away, but she felt it in the Force. A storm of emotions raged inside her. When she was alone, she allowed the wave of emotions to crash over her and her body rocked with uncontrollable sobs. “I can’t watch you die, Ben.”

Rey collapsed next to Ben, pulling the blankets back to climb under them with him. She briefly revealed the large bacta patches wrapped over the majority of his right upper torso. Whatever had happened, the damage was extensive. She gently rested her head on his good shoulder and searched for his hand. It lay cold and limp across his chest. She picked it up gingerly, turning it over in her hands, studying every last detail. She pressed her hand against his palm, the size of his hand dwarfing hers in comparison. She slipped her fingers between his, waiting for the warm embrace of his hand, but there was nothing.

"Why can't I feel you with me, Ben?" she whispered to him. "Please come back. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have lied about Sidious, or the vial, or the burn marks on my hand. I should have trusted that you would keep me safe. I was so angry that you kept what happened to my parents from me, and terrified of my own darkness, but I should never have shut you out of our bond. I let you believe things that are not true... Please, Ben. Please don't leave me. This is all my fault. You warned me and I didn't want to listen. I should have believed you. You were right. Okay? You were right. If you die, I'll never forgive myself. I just want you back. Please. I would give up everything to feel you hold me right now. Being with you were the happiest moments of my entire life."

“There are so many things I didn't say. Please give me another chance. Please don't give up. You still have so much to do.” Her tears trailed across his skin. “You have to teach me, remember? You have to help me build my lightsaber! You promised! Can you hear me? Or are you already gone? I can't feel you and it kills me. I need you, Ben. You have to fight. Please...you have to stay with me. I can't do this without you. I love you..." She felt a jolt of energy through her hand.

She gasped.

_can you hear me?_

"Ben?" She searched his face for any sign of recognition or response. Nothing. "Ben, I love you!" She felt the energy tingle in her hand again. "Ben!" She lifted herself up to study his face. "Please be in there, Ben."

She rested her hand against his temple, as he had done to her when they first met, and focused on finding a connection to his subconscious. She closed her eyes and imagined herself seeing what he could see. "I love you," she whispered, and she sensed emotions awake in his mind. She focused
on them, holding onto them, trying to find a way in. Dropping into lower levels of the Force, Rey pushed through their bond into his side of the bond.

The memory was older, she could see him sitting in front of a mirror, building his own lightsaber. He was several years younger, and the scar she had given him was absent from his face. His thoughts flowed through her mind about "cycling field energizers," "focusing crystal activators," "diatium power cells," "blade emitters," and the "emitter matrix," which he had taken the precaution not to invert. She and Rose had already built the majority of the lightsaber, all she needed to do was place the crystal. She watched as he created the Force containment field in the crystal chamber that housed the plasma blade, falling into a deep meditative state as he placed the crystal in the chamber. The realization finally hit her, he had presented every single step of the process to her.

"Thank you, Ben. You kept your promise," she whispered. The memory fractured, and she was left in darkness. Rey pushed deeper, more forcefully, until she pushed into Kylo’s dream as she had when they confronted Sidious. There was different this time, however. It felt more… real.

At first all, she could see was white. She was in a snowstorm, she realized. Then she started to see...something. A figure in white knelt next to something black. The wind blew snowflakes into his hair and tossed it around his face. The figure turned, but it wasn’t who she had expected.

She stopped.

“Dev?”

His smile was like warm sunlight. “It took you long enough.”

It was a strange comment to make. Rey wondered how it was Kylo’s mind that created this dream, if he wasn’t in it. It was a strange dream. The wind nipped at her cheeks, the ice was cold under feet, her hair – wet from the falling snow – was pinned to her face. No, nothing about it felt like a dream. “Where are we?”

Dev squinted his eyes and tilted his head up to the sky. “Somewhere in between, I guess.” Her brows pinched in confusion. In between what? When he tilted his back down, her stare followed his. Next to him, her bondmate was crumpled in the freezing snow in the same position she had left him.
“Ben?”

Dev shook his head. “He can’t answer you.”

“Why not?” she asked. She stepped closer, holding her breath as she focused on the rise and fall of Ben’s chest. She released the breath slowly. At least for the moment, he was alive.

“He’s in an even deeper level of the Force,” Dev answered softly. “Meditative. He should be dead, but he’s trying to hold on, for you.”

Rey knelt next to Dev. His profile, hair, clothes… all of it was the same as the man she had seen before. His energy in the Force was familiar. He was the same boy from Kylo’s memories. Everything in the Force told her that this was real. “Are you here to take him?”

“No,” he said, looking up from her bondmate. “I’m here for you.”

“Me? Do you even know who I am?” Surely, it was a joke. He had never met her before. He died years before she left Jakku. He couldn’t know her.

“We all know who you are, Rey.”

Her first question was, ‘who?’ But she wasn’t certain she was ready to know. It was alarming enough that he knew who she was. “How?”

“Well, I knew about you from before, at the Jedi Temple,” he said with a smile. “I knew about the girl in his dreams from his memories and I knew who you would become to him from… a vision in the Force.”

“You saw me as I am now?”

He nodded.

“Did you see this moment?”
He nodded again.

“Do you know what happens to him?”

His smile faded. “Yes.” His tone wasn’t especially sorrowful or troubled, but something was missing that made her uneasy.

Rey turned fully to search Dev’s face. He obligingly returned her stare, but he was not her bondmate. There was not a flinch or hint of expression on his face that revealed what he knew. When she found her voice, her words came out as more of a statement than a question. “But you can’t tell me?”

Dev’s eyes dropped down to Kylo as if he were considering telling her the truth. If he did tell her what would befall her bondmate, did she want to know? What would it do to her, if he told her that she would lose Ben? Dev looked up from his friend to study her carefully. “He’ll wake up again,” he assured her. She saw the truth in his eyes, but it didn’t soften her unease.

Dev wasn’t telling her something, and she wanted to know what he had seen. “Did you see how this war ends?”

He lifted his hands to blow on them and rub them together to keep warm. She wondered if he did it as a distraction. Could Force ghosts feel the cold? Was he even a Force ghost? He looked real. She wished he could have been real. She needed his help. The battle for the galaxy was at their feet and she didn’t know what to do without her bondmate. She had to believe they would win this war, but his silence frightened her. “The future is fluid,” he said carefully. “I’ve seen countless possibilities.”

“Are there futures where the Resistance survives, where we win?” she whispered.

He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly.

“One.”

Her heart dropped. Was this it? Would they lose this war? Would she lose Finn, Rose, or Ben?
Would they all die? Was it truly that hopeless? The tears were hot as they rolled down her wind-chilled cheeks. “How? I’ll do whatever it takes. Please, Dev, how do we win?”

He bit his lip and shook his head. There was a gloss of sympathy and regret in his eyes. “I can’t tell you.”

No. You can’t do this to us.

“You told me he’d wake up,” she said through tears. “You told me that. Why can’t you tell me this?” Dev knew what would happen. He knew how to save her friends and win the war. If he told her, she could save them all, but he refused.

Why?

“Because Kylo will wake up whether I tell you or not,” he answered, his eyes trailing down to his friend’s reposed face. “For you to win, I can’t tell you what needs to happen. I can’t take the chance. If you know the future, you will alter it.”

Rey sat back into the snow and crossed her arms. What could she possibly do to alter it? She was angry. Angry at the war, angry at Kylo for leaving the First Order, angry at Kylo for not leaving soon enough, angry at Dev for not telling her how to win, angry that she didn’t know enough about the Force to know why it would change the future if he told her. It wasn’t fair. The Force was supposed to guide them to what was right. How could there only be one future of infinite possibilities where they won? If he could see the future, why didn’t he do more to prevent the other possibilities from occurring? Why didn’t he tell Kylo this before, to prevent him from being injured? Why didn’t he tell him before he killed his father? Why didn’t he tell him before he fell? “If you can foresee the future, how did you not see what would happen at the temple?”

His stare shifted back to hers. There was something soft, but sorrowful in his eyes then. “I did.”

“You knew he would fall?”

Dev nodded slowly.

“You knew you would die?”
He nodded again.

“Then why didn’t you stop it?”

He sighed, smiling sadly. “As I told you, Rey, there was only one possibility where we win.”

Her breath hitched. She was instantly cold, but it was from something far more pervasive than the snow around her. “You,” she realized. “You’ve known this for years.”

He nodded with more enthusiasm. Something in his eyes awakened as she understood the implications. “I saw it all.”

“The night he burned down the temple?”

His only response was a soft chuckle as his stare returned to the sky.

Rey got the distinct feeling he was waiting for something. Or someone. Perhaps he was waiting for her – waiting for her to remember something he wouldn’t express, or understand something he wouldn’t explain. Rey didn’t have the patience for cryptic messages from a Force ghost when the implications were significant. “You set all of this in motion?”

“I had help,” he admitted with a sly grin, “And a bit of luck.”

It should have been a relief; their bond wasn’t just the whim of the Force. It should have meant that their destinies were not set by a higher power. But if these cosmic spirits had manipulated their choices from the beginning, was it any better than the Force? “All this time, all those choices… do I have no free will?”

“It’s not like that,” he assured her. He continued to stare up at the heavens, and she was certain if he wasn’t waiting for something, then he was listening to someone. She wondered if maybe he was seeing something, right then, something she couldn’t see. “When you were called to the lightsaber, I showed you the visions, but you ran into the forest, right into him. You forced your way back into the bond. You called the lightsaber to help you, Anakin just helped make sure Ben didn’t get it first.”
Anakin, his grandfather, had helped her. “Anakin was part of this too?”

“Very much so,” he replied casually as if they weren’t discussing Force ghosts interfering with their destinies. “Why do you think it was his lightsaber that called to you?”

“The bond?”

He smiled. There was something knowing but clandestine in his eyes. She knew without asking that he wouldn’t tell her. Rey had believed the Force was responsible for calling her to the lightsaber, and creating the bond, and bringing them together. Did the Force have help? “Those visions on Takodana? That was you?”

Dev looked at her like he had known her for her entire life, he looked at her like… family. “I have a bond with Ben, and you have a bond with him. I’ve been showing you visions through the Force for years, Rey.”

“You’ve always been there,” she realized. “Watching over him… and me.”

He shrugged, patting his friend on the shoulder. “I’ve done what I could and trusted in the Force for the rest. You’ve both changed the path a few times, but you’ve always found your way back to this future.”

It struck her then, how deeply the choices she made mattered. Were the questions she was asking or not asking changing the future, creating consequential moments that would come to pass long after the choice was made. Did every choice she make change the future? It was terrifying to consider. “How will I know what the right choice is?”

She watched a war behind his eyes as Dev struggle with the truth. He couldn’t tell her, but she could see how profoundly he wanted to. He nodded in acceptance, perhaps to himself or to someone she couldn’t perceive whispering in his ear. When his eyes found hers again, they were pleading. “Never lose hope, Rey.” She felt the significance of his words. Whatever he was trying to tell her, it was fate-altering. “What you will face – it will require hope beyond this world, and a little bit of luck.”

His head tilted to the sky again and then there was an immediate urgency to his energy. “Rey, he says it’s time to go,” Dev said. “Touch his hand and it’ll take you back.”
“Can he... can he hear you?”

Dev nodded.

Rey sighed. Her body relaxed as her stare returned to her bondmate. “So Ben knows what you did for him? For us?”

“For now,” Dev answered. There was something rueful in his tone. “He won’t remember when he wakes up.”

Her vision blurred as she begged Ben to open his eyes, so he could have one last moment with the boy who meant so much to him. It wasn’t fair that he wouldn’t have the chance to remember. “Will I remember?” She lifted her stare to Dev’s sorrowful smile and she knew the truth. His warm hand found her shoulder in comfort. He felt so real, as if they would wake up and he’d be there. She turned and wrapped her arms around him, crying into his shoulder. “Then why? Why tell me any of this? Will I even remember you?”

Without looking up, she knew he was nodding again. “You’ll have certain feelings and thoughts that you can’t explain. Your soul will remember it, that is what’s important.”

Smiling, she swallowed her sorrow. For years, when she and Kylo were at their loneliest, they had someone watching over them, trying to guide them toward a certain future. Dev had given his life for it. Now it was up to them, and she didn’t want to let him down. There were no words for her to thank him for everything he’d done, but when she pulled away and their eyes met, there was understanding in them.

“I have a good feeling about this, Rey,” he said, nodding toward her bondmate. She turned, vision blurry, as she stared down at Kylo.

Touching his hand, she whispered again, “I love you, Ben.” Rey felt a spark, and a bright light flashed through her vision. She awoke with a start. Kylo was still unconscious next to her, and she was still a hostage on the Millennium Falcon. Reaching into her pocket, she found the crystal, still streaked with blood.

*Our blood*. The thought twisted through her stomach, igniting into a deep-seated rage.
"I know what I have to do, Ben," her voice trembling in anger, "I can't wait here for them to take us. He wants a battle? I'll bring him one. I will kill them all. For you. Don't you dare die on me; I have a plan." She slid the crystal back in her pocket and gently kissed his cold, pale forehead. When her lips met his skin, there was something else besides anger in her heart – hope. For some reason she couldn’t explain, she had hope.

Finn and Rose were seated at the table, his arm around her as she sobbed. They were startled by Rey stomping past, wiping her eyes on her sleeves.

"Where are you going?" Finn asked worriedly.

"I need to meditate," she replied without stopping.

"For what?" he shouted after her.

"To build a lightsaber!" she shouted back.
Chapter End Notes

Fear of death

Rey fears that Kylo is dying
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“The Resistance is out of range of our cannons, sir,” the officer informed Hux on the bridge. “Shall we pull our fighters back?”

“No,” the general smiled, “We have been searching the galaxy for them, and they were foolish enough to show up at our door. We are ending this. Now. Send everything we have at them. Let them feel the true power of the First Order.”
“Yes, sir,” the officer replied. “And what should the squads do with the hostages on Ilum?”

“They’re not going anywhere,” Hux smiled. “Let’s focus on ending this little Resistance party, and then I’ll send for them. Oh, what a glorious day. We have captured the girl, the Resistance is in our grasp, and the bane of my existence is finally dead. It is a glorious day, indeed.”
Alliance

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes
“Where are the Allied ships?!” Poe shouted in frustration into the cockpit. Wave after wave of TIE fighters pummeled the already limited fleet of the Resistance. They had scrounged these ships from old Rebel bases across the galaxy. It was an eclectic mixture of X-wing, Y-wing and A-Wing starfighters. Most hadn’t been used in years, and some were barely flight-worthy.
Poe had chosen an A-wing like his mother used to pilot. His fighter was faster than the TIE fighters, and he was easily able to outmaneuver them. It was disheartening, however, when he would take out a dozen fighters and moments later three dozen more would join the fight.

Explosions rocked around him as he weaved through the battle, decimating every TIE fighter in his path. Still, he was all too aware of their losses. The last of the Resistance was quickly dwindling. He knew he could not order a retreat.

Poe began to feel the hopelessness bury seeds of doubt into his mind. He watched a TIE fighter shoot down another member of the Resistance. He cried out as he obliterated the TIE in revenge. Beebee-Ate’s whistle of excitement distracted him from his momentary celebration.

He saw a flash to his left and turned in his seat to get a better look. A motley fleet of starfighters, bombers, gunships, freighters, frigates, a cruiser, and a variety of transports and shuttles emerged from hyperspace. Even the last remaining ships had arrived for the fight as promised. Every ship that could be used was rallied for the strike, assembled from every corner of the galaxy; no matter the strength of the armament capabilities of the vessel. There were hundreds of ships.

“Ha, Ha!” Poe shouted in exhilaration into the emptiness, “They’re here! The Allied forces are here!”

“What are your orders, Black Leader?” the Lieutenant Connix asked across the comms.

“It’s time,” he growled. “Let’s bring down the Finalizer.”
Chapter End Notes

Implied violence

space battle
Revelation

Chapter Notes

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"Is it supposed to do that?" Finn asked as Rey waved the double-bladed indigo saberstaff through the air. The plasma blades were unstable and serrated-looking in appearance.

"I think so?" she laughed. "It wasn’t entirely on purpose. It was unstable like Ben’s and I didn’t want to create vents for it. I thought I could make it similar to my quarterstaff instead. It was fairly straightforward. I just added beam emitters at both ends and tweaked the magnetic rings slightly. I wasn’t sure how it would turn out cannibalizing Luke’s lightsaber and using the spare electronics, but it works. And it seems stable...enough. And thanks to Rose’s help, we were able to do it rather quickly.” She smiled, admiring the weapon in her hands.

“I like the color,” Finn replied.

“I was surprised by the color," she answered honestly. "I thought it would be blue, like Luke’s, and part of me feared that it would be red...but purple hadn't crossed my mind."

"It looks...royal," Rose smiled. "Befitting of the Last Jedi."

She disengaged the weapon and placed it at her hip. “Have we heard any more about the success of the Resistance fight?”

“No, not yet,” Finn sighed. “But I believe that Poe will pull it off. He always does.”

With the help of the Hutts and the other allied forces that had sworn loyalty to their general, they had a chance, but against the entire First Order? It seemed hopeless. Everything seemed hopeless. Rey shook the darkness from her thoughts. They would do this. The had to do this. “We can’t sit here and wait for the Resistance to save us. Ben is out there – somewhere – dying. I’ll fight them all on my own if I need to, but –”

Rose stared at Finn then Chewbacca, eaching giving her a nod to her silent question. “Well, it beats waiting around for the First Order,” Rose said as she unholstered her blaster. “We’ll give them hell.
And then we’ll take the *Falcon* and help you find Ben.” Rose stared at Finn as she said the last part.

He nodded in promise. “Of course, we’ll help you, Rey. We’ll use the thermal scanner. We’ll find him.”

Chewbacca growled in affirmation and left to retrieve his bowblaster. Rey exhaled slowly. *We’re coming, Ben,* she assured him. It was more than she could have promised him before. The odds were stacked against them; there was the battle of allied forces raging above their heads, there was the First Order troops that held them prisoner, there was Ben slowly dying out in the darkness, but they had weapons, hope, fight left in them, and the Force. It was everything they needed.

As they waited for Chewbacca to return, Rey thought more about those odds. “Can I ask you guys something?” Rey’s tone was more serious than before. “I’ve been thinking about the Resistance attack. Something has been bothering me, and, at first, I couldn’t figure out why. But the more I thought about it, the more I couldn’t shake the feeling that something didn’t add up. Does it seem strange to you guys that Poe sent us to a world that is a mining center for the First Order? Ben acted like it was something most people would know.

“Surely, Poe should know then, right? I mean, the *Hutts* somehow figured out we would need help. And then the Resistance organized an attack on the *Finalizer,* almost like they knew they would be waiting for us. But how would they know, when we didn’t even know they were up there?” Rose nervously glanced at Finn, and Rey felt a chill shiver through her. They knew more than they had been telling her. Rage ignited instantly, drawing in the darkness. “Someone better start talking now...” she growled through gritted teeth.

“I think...” Finn began nervously, “That he may have set a trap for Kylo...using you.” Her heart sank.

*No... No, it can’t be. The First Order shot him down, not the Resistance.*

“What do you mean?”

“Remember when I told you it was important that you tell me if you were in love with Kylo?” She nodded, wondering where he could possibly be going with this, “Well, that was because Poe ordered me to assassinate him. He said you were bait for an ambush. He was certain Kylo would know where to find you. When I saw the First Order here, I figured he knew that they were here, too. Obviously, the stormtroopers would notice the *Millennium Falcon* land and inform Kylo. Poe knew Kylo had...has feelings for you, and he knew he’d come for you. I think his plan was for me
to kill him while the Resistance attacked the Finalizer. None of us had any way of knowing that Kylo would desert the First Order.” Rey stared at him, shaking, as she absorbed all the information.

_This is all my fault. Ben is dying because of me. If I had just listened to him when he warned me about Ilum, none of this would have happened._

“I want you to know, Rey. I couldn’t kill him.” His voice broke. “I had my chance in the caves. I had the blaster to his head and everything. I couldn’t do it...to you...or him. He really does care about you. I’m sorry.” She shook her head in disbelief.

“But you never told me, Finn,” she gritted through tears. “You should have told me. I don’t know what to do. I feel so betrayed. The cause I was fighting for is no better than the First Order. I should have listened to Ben. He tried to tell me, but I wouldn’t listen. I was so sure I was right. But now Ben will die, and we may be joining him...all because of me. Poe used me to get to Ben. He used us all. He put us all in danger like we are nothing. And now he leaves us in the hands of the First Order. If I see him again, I’ll kill him.” She wiped the tears from her eyes and gathered her strength.

“The Resistance has abandoned us. It’s all up to us now.” Rey whispered.
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The Allied Forces had turned the tide. The heavy losses had slowed, giving the Resistance the chance to gain ground. The heavier cruises were able to lay down cover fire, so the smaller fighters could separate and eliminate the TIEs one by one.

Poe was hopeful that the trap would work on Ilum, that Finn and Grakkus would succeed in assassinating Kylo Ren. The command shuttle had already "slipped" through their defenses down to the surface. This was it. This was their only chance to stop the First Order.

If Kylo Ren fell, it would be a twofold victory. He would no longer be in Rey’s mind. Poe knew what it felt like to have Kylo Ren inside his mind; Poe had no doubt the murderer was controlling her, convincing her that his ambitions and convictions were hers. Maybe Kylo loved her, maybe he loved her power, but none of that mattered. Without him, they would have their Jedi back. She would fight for the Resistance again.

It would be a significant advantage against the enemy if she was the last remaining Force user in the war. That is, if the First Order didn’t implode first. If the Resistance could break through the defenses while the First Order scrambled for a new leader, the Finalizer could fall. If the Finalizer fell, the flotillas could fall to their allies across the galaxy. Yes, if Kylo Ren fell, it could set off a series of events that ended the First Order’s threat to the galaxy.

The Allied Forces were strong enough to do it. They may have been a mismatched and uncoordinated ragtag group of rebels, but from everything he had learned from his parents, this was the essence of a rebellion. They didn’t need the top-of-the-line fighters, enhanced technology, or daunting numbers. What they didn’t have in numbers, they made up for in sheer will. They had everything to fight for…and even more to lose. If they were unsuccessful, they would be all be dead.

For a moment, everything looked hopeful.

“This is it,” Poe said into the comms. “This is our chance.”

“We can do this!” Connix laughed in the fighter next to him. She was laughing one moment, and then she disappeared in a ball of fire. Beebee-Ate cried out for her, but there was nothing anyone could do. Poe contorted his body in the cockpit in search of a lurking enemy ship. He banked the fighter to the right in the belief that the attack must have come from below. Though there was no hidden TIE beneath him, the maneuver saved his life. The beams from the laser cannons missed his ship by centimeters. The fatal shot that killed his squadmate was not fired by a TIE. The life of a longtime friend—and nearly his own life—was taken by friendly fire, by a Hutt ship.
“No,” Poe whispered into the cockpit. He kept his eye on the surrounding Hutt ships. Several TIE fighters fell to their laser cannons, but his stomach sank as another x-wing was reduced to flames. They were still firing upon the First Order, but they had evolved into firing upon the Resistance as well. The Hutts, as always, had an allegiance only to themselves. The Resistance no longer had one foe; it had two. The consequences could prove fatal; the Hutt ships made up a substantial part of their alliance.

“No!” he shouted again. He had been so certain this was the only way to win; he hadn’t seen the forest through the trees. The enemy of his enemy did not make them his ally. He was foolish enough to trust creatures who could not be trusted. By trusting them, he had likely doomed the Resistance. Their only hope was that Kylo Ren would fall to the ambush by Finn and…. 

If the Hutts had betrayed the Resistance, then Finn and Rey could be walking into their own trap.

He grabbed his comlink, alerting the entire Resistance, “Treat the Hutts as hostiles! I repeat, the Hutts are hostiles!”
Chapter End Notes

Death

Minor character death
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See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Where are you, Ben?” she asked hesitantly. She expected to see his blanket-wrapped form, half-buried in snow, appear in front of her, but he materialized face down in the snow, the blankets missing, and the fighter nowhere in sight. “Ben! What happened!” He should be shivering. Dread flooded through her as she approached him. He was deathly pale.

Ben?

She cautiously knelt next to him. She closed her eyes and reached out into the Force, sensing his slow, weak heartbeat. Sighing in relief, she gently rolled him to his back. His bare skin was cold to the touch. "Please, hold on Ben. I found a way to save you. You just have to hold on." She placed a new blanket over him. It was thin, but it was better than nothing. She squeezed his hand. "I love you," she whispered, but the energy did not return.

Chewbacca walked through the doors with his bowcaster.

"Ok, everyone ready?" Rey asked. Finn and Rose raised their blasters. "Wait, Finn, take this," she said as she handed him her new lightsaber.

"What? What about you, Rey?"

"I built it. It's mine. That lightsaber will be the weapon I keep for the rest of my life, and hopefully, I will never have to use it." She paused, summoning Kylo's lightsaber. "But tonight, I'm going to take on the entire First Order, and it only feels right that I should do it with this." She activated the blade, and her eyes glowed red as she let the anger build up inside her. "No prisoners, no mercy...as none will be afforded to us. Does anyone have a question about the plan?"

"Slaughter the stormtroopers, fly to the Finalizer, Get Kylo...uh, Ben to the Force death machine, support you on your rampage... No, I think it's pretty straightforward," Finn quipped.

They stealthily disembarked down the Falcon’s ventral boarding ramp, circling around the rear of the ship to a nearby snowdrift that had been created when they landed.
"There is only one platoon and two laser cannons!" Finn whispered.

Rey closed her eyes to view them better in the Force. “How many are in a platoon?”

“Five squads, so fifty,” Finn said. “Take out the laser cannons first, before they disable the ship.”

They all pulled out their blasters, taking one last look at each other to gather courage. This was it. While there wasn’t an army to meet them as they had all assumed, the odds of fifty against four were still daunting, especially when those fifty were all firing at once. Rey looked from Finn, to Rose, to Chewie and knew this was where it all could end. With a nod, they turned to their positions and began firing. The cold, dark landscape instantly lit up with brightly colored beams. The first cannon turret erupted in a fiery explosion. The stormtroopers immediately returned fire. The second turret swiveled toward their snowdrift, demolishing their cover in seconds.

“Spread out!” Rey yelled above the blaster fire. She abandoned the blaster and circled around the other side of the freighter. As her friends focused their efforts on the second turret—drawing the majority of the fire—she stepped up behind the stormtroopers in the snow.

The others had split up; Chewbacca was firing upon the turret, Rose was holding the platoon at bay with her blaster, and Finn was dispatching any brave troopers who breached their snowdrift. Finn was not familiar with a quarterstaff, but he used her weapon to block and stab proficiently. He may have not quite used the double blades to his advantage, but there was no doubt he was dangerous with the weapon. She watched him quickly impale two stormtroopers—one in front, one behind him—and throw their bodies to the snow. Rose stood at his side, blasting away stormtroopers left and right. They were a formidable team. Once the second turret was destroyed, Chewbacca retreated by the Falcon, destroying any trooper that was an immediate threat to his friends.

Rey activated the lightsaber, shuddering as the brilliant red pierced through the first stormtrooper. She remembered that night on the Supremacy when they took on the Praetorian guard together; she had felt invincible as she trusted in Kylo and the energy that connected them. Standing in the cold darkness of Ilum, alone, she felt lost without that energy.

Every one of you fight for the very reason why he is lying out there somewhere in the snow. I will kill you all!

Her anger absorbed the dark energy around her. Without Kylo, she had to trust only in herself, the way he trusted her. Rey had to believe that she was powerful enough, that she was skilled enough, that she was more than the strength of their bond. Without the bond, she was truly alone for the
first time in the Force. She understood for the first time just how profoundly the bond had affected them both, how significant of a living thing it was. It was more than just a mere bridge, it made them both...better. It enhanced their strengths.

On the other hand, feeling only her own energy in the Force, she also understood for the first time how strong she was on her own. She brought as much power and influence to the bond as he did. What she had once lacked in knowledge and he had lacked in wisdom, were now equal. They truly were equals in every sense of the word. She didn’t need a crystal or the knowledge of some old books to make her a Jedi. She didn’t need to be a Jedi to be someone worth remembering; maybe that was what Luke had been trying to teach her all along. If Kylo never woke again, she still had enough strength in the Force to stop the First Order on her own. If he never woke again, that’s exactly what she would do.

Rey stopped contemplating each move and just let the darkness of the Force guide her on her warpath of destruction. It became instinctual, as if she already knew which moves to make. She slashed and cut through stormtroopers with ease, the anger rising with each strike of her blade. The strength and power surged through her body like electricity. She felt invincible.

A stormtrooper shot a blaster bolt at her, but she quickly deflected it with the lightsaber. Her sense in the Force had become second nature, as if she had trained and practiced the moves. Her confidence grew, and she began ripping blasters out of their grasps with her free hand. Every new method she tried fed the insatiable, dark energy growing in her heart. The darkness desired the blood of her enemy, and she released herself to its temptation. She lost herself in the carnage as bodies piled around her.

When only a handful of her enemies remained, she used the Force to pull a stormtrooper to his knees. She reversed her grip on the hilt and thrust the blade down into his chest. She shoved the dead body to the side, crying out in triumph into the darkness, her chest heaving from the adrenaline rocketing through her veins. Moving to finish off the remaining few stormtroopers in her way, she was halted in her steps by bright green blasts that lit up the night.

When the cloud of snow around them had settled, the troopers were dead. Bright glowing landing lights against the dark, pointed shape of a yacht were visible above them. At first, Rey thought Poe had come to rescue them, until the boarding ramp opened with a pneumatic hiss. Rey had never seen one in the flesh before, but she knew exactly what it was the instant she saw the grotesque creatures.

*The Hutts.*

A red protocol droid shuffled down the ramp, followed by a heavily armored Weequay. It was difficult for Rey to discern an expression amidst the wrinkles of its leathery skin, but its posture
didn’t seem friendly. The Hutt spoke the same foul, viscous language that she had overheard speaking with Poe in the temple. The Weequay laughed as the droid immediately translated.

“His high exaltedness has expressed his pleasure in being able to assist you.”

That’s odd, because I didn’t “express” my gratitude.

Rey swallowed her distrust and revulsion. She turned to Finn and Rose, but they were staring back at her expectantly. They were looking to her as if she was someone worth following. “Thank him for his…assistance, but why is he here? Who sent you?”

The Hutt tilted his head, eyeing her as he discussed something with the mercenary in hushed tones. When he finally spoke, it was pretentiously cheerful, his full body chuckle at odds with the sly shift of the Weequay’s hand to the holster of his blaster. He executed the movement as one of boredom, drumming his fingers along the tanned nerf leather. The protocol droid began speaking again, but Rey kept her eyes on the Weequay. “Admiral Dameron requested we secure you and bring you to the safety of the Resistance.”

I bet he did.

“Admiral?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Rey watched the Hutt’s stare linger on her as he spoke. Rey’s fingers tightened around the hilt of her lightsaber. Her focus remained on the mercenary. The droid seemed oblivious to her unease as she continued. “His exaltedness will explain the alliance better onboard.”

Like hell he will.

“Tell his high exaltedness…”

The droid made a wide, grandiose display with her red hand as she introduced her master. “Grakkus.”
The Resistance had trusted him. Leia had trusted him—enough to form an alliance with him—but something inside Rey told her Leia would have warned her not to get on that ship. “Tell his high exaltedness Grakkus that we appreciate his trouble and his offer, but we have our own ship.”

The Hutt’s voice had lost its pleasant tone, or at least, as pleasant as the harsh, guttural garbling of Huttese could sound. “His high exaltedness Grakkus insists.” When Rey made no move to join them, the Hutt growled more to the droid. “Are you the Jedi?”

If there was any question that could confirm her suspicions, it was that one. “What does that matter?”

The Hutt chuckled and turned to the mercenary. “Jujiminmee doe Jedai, killya doe peedunkee, doe schutta, an doe Wooky.” The Weequay’s hand shifted to his blaster, and the Force was alight in warning. Rey barely had enough time to raise her hand before the bolts rang out in the night. The mercenary had fired off six bolts, two blasting through the droid to reach them. In any other situation, his targets would have been dead before they realized what had happened. What he hadn’t taken into consideration was Rey. The cruel smile on the Weequay’s face faded as the bolts intended to kill her friends froze in mid-air. Rose and Finn stared at her in half-amazement and half-fright.

“Go back to the Falcon!” she shouted, leaving no room for argument.

Rey connected to the energy of each of the bolts and turned them toward the Weequay and the Hutt. The pilot had anticipated her counterattack, tilting the ship and closing the boarding ramp before the bolts could do damage. As the ship began to pivot around toward her, Rey took off in a run. She knew she couldn’t outrun the ship or its weapons, but she needed to catch up to her friends. It was the only way she could protect them. Rey could hear the ship approaching quickly; a quick spike in the Force was all the warning she had before the missiles were upon her. It was too much energy to halt while running, so she ducked instead. The missiles crashed into the snow ahead of her, the shock wave tossing her backward into the air as the snow exploded as high as the eyes could see.

For a moment, the displaced snow obscured her view of the ship, though she could hear the engines as they hovered close by. It was a relief, only because it meant they hadn’t gone after her friends. As the snow settled, the blue lights of the ship’s engines came into view. She turned as the ship circled around again, sending a barrage of bolts in her direction. She lifted her hands and braced herself, creating a barrier with the Force. Each explosion that crashed against her barrier jolted through her, vibrating through her gritted teeth.
Once the last bolt exploded against the barrier, she released her grip on the Force and took off in a sprint toward the *Millennium Falcon*. She could feel the ship bearing down upon her again, could feel it lower in altitude than before. She quickly glanced over her shoulder as she ran, checking its distance. It skimmed the surface of the planet, spraying large plumes of snow in its wake. It was nearly upon her, close enough to easily shoot her down. Not a single shot was taken, almost as if… they were attempting to run her down. She pulled Kylo’s lightsaber from her belt and ignited it. At the last moment, she dropped to her knees in the snow, extending her arms upward. She braced against the ground with the Force and thrust the lightsaber into the belly of the ship. With strength beyond her own, she sliced it through from the bow to stern.

Severing the electrical and control lines immediately disabled the ship. It retained lift for a few hundred meters before crashing into the surface. She didn’t slow the impact, as she had attempted to do for Kylo, but she knew the crash was more than survivable. With a quick sweep in the Force, she sensed over a dozen lifeforms onboard. She would rectify that.

She would show them no mercy. The darkness licked at her bright energy in the Force. She pulled herself deeper into the Force until she could see the inner components of the yacht. Focusing on the small, enclosed Engineering Bay, she sensed the compromised life-support system, the leaking fuel lines, the torn electrical wires. All it required was the manipulation of a few electrical wires to create a spark. One spark was all she needed. She felt nothing as the entire ship was consumed in an explosive fireball. She felt nothing as she heard them scream in agony. She felt nothing as she closed her eyes, backing away from the ship into the darkness.

On their way back to the *Falcon*, her friends had stopped to watch her remove the Hutt and his crew from existence. Rose, Finn, and Chewbacca stood thirty meters in front of her, mouths agape in shock. "Go tell your ‘buddy,’ Poe, the Huttss can’t be trusted," she breathed. She secured Kylo’s lightsaber next to her blaster on her hip, then climbed back on board without a single backward glance at the destruction in her wake.
Chapter End Notes

Death

Rey kills a lot of 'bad guys'
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See the end of the chapter for more notes
“General.” Lieutenant Mitaka approached Hux in the last room of Weapons Development. The general was facing away from the anxious lieutenant, but he knew it wasn't urgent. Everything was going according to plan. Hux’s last-minute warning to the most influential players in the Hutt cartel had provided them with a chance to escape the annihilation of Nal Hutta, and, in return, a favor. They had informed him of the location of the *Millennium Falcon* and a chance to crush the Resistance, as long as Kylo Ren reached the surface for an ambush. Hux never intended for the Supreme Leader to reach the surface, because he refused to lose in another contention for the throne. He had planned to destroy Ilum and whatever Resistance members had planned the ambush. But it had turned out even better than he had hoped.

Kylo Ren abdicated the throne to the clone Hux had intended to murder and replace him, committed treason by defecting, and was properly disposed of. The Resistance and all of their anarchist allies were dropped into their laps like gifts of fate, and the remaining Resistance members on Ilum had been captured by his army. It would have been perfect if he could have seen the look on Snoke’s and Kylo Ren’s faces as they realized just what he had accomplished with *intelligence*. They may have had the Force, but that didn’t make them more qualified to rule. And soon, he wouldn’t have the “Force problem” to contend with, either.

Now he stood before the machine that would give him *everything*. It would be perfect if the man he was strapping into the machine would quit screaming. “For Force sake, you coward, hold yourself together,” he hissed, closing the last set of binders.

“General,” the lieutenant repeated. His wavering voice made Hux wish it was the lieutenant strapped into the machine instead.

“Yes,” Hux sighed, as he turned to the control panel. The test run was necessary. It was pertinent that it ran as smoothly as the previous part of the plan. With what he planned to do, Hux doubted he would get a second chance. He flipped several switches on the control panel then turned to his subordinate expectantly.

“The Knights of Ren and the Supreme Leader have departed to the surface,” the lieutenant informed him. He nodded in affirmation, powering on the machine. The circular arms began to revolve around the vertical platform with increasing speed. The man chained to the platform screamed in horror, trying in vain to escape.

“Sir...”

“Hold on. You’ll miss the best part.” Hux smiled triumphantly as the machine whirled around the man until lightning arced from the pit below. The man’s screams of terror echoed through the room.
and down the corridor. Until his last breath, he begged for life, but it was in vain. The lieutenant stood in trembling silence as the machine performed exactly as it had been intended. When the officer left that room, the man was hanging lifeless in the binders. The silence that followed Mitaka back down the corridor was more haunting than the man’s screams.

Chapter End Notes

Death

Death of an unknown character
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See the end of the chapter for more notes
"Fire up the engines, Chewie, let's find Ben and get off this forsaken planet," Rey whispered the last part, but Chewbacca still whined in agreement. She often forgot he had much better hearing than a human. "I'll be up there to help you in a minute," she assured him. Rey turned to the corner of the room. Ben? Venturing out into a snowstorm was as foolish as venturing out into a sandstorm, she knew their best chance of finding the wreckage was by air.

Though the bond was weak, she could feel it pulling her to him. It would give them a direction, at least, like a weak homing beacon. She’d had to leave him to fight off the First Order, and, as it turned out, the Hutts as well. Though she could feel him in the bond, she hadn’t been successful in opening a connection since. It was unsettling, a growing fear churned in her stomach.

*What if he’s…*

Rey connected to the Force, but before she could try again, she was distracted by shouts in another part of the ship. Before her weapon had landed in her palm, men in masks and armor swarmed into the room. She recognized them immediately from her vision.

*The Knights of Ren.*

They were the closest thing Kylo had to friends or even allies. Did they know his connection to her? Had they come to help him? Did they know what happened to him? Their weapons were drawn, but if she could just make them understand, they could help her save him. Her hands were raised in supplication, weapon balanced non-threateningly between her thumb and forefinger. “Listen, I know who you all are; I know what you mean to Ben. I need your help, please! Ben needs your help; he’s dying! He’s out there in the snow somewhere, all alone; you have to save him!”

The Knight closest to her turned to the others, and they all lowered their lightsabers. He pivoted back, cautiously stepping closer. “Who are you?”

“I’m….” Why did it matter so profoundly to her how she answered that question? “I’m Rey of the Resistance.”
“Resistance?” The man stepped back, his hand tightening around the grip of his weapon. “Then who are you to…Ben?”

“I’m not his enemy, I am his…. We’re bonded, and I can find him if you help me.”

“You’re bonded…by the Force,” he said slowly, digesting the new information. The Knight turned to the others, before continuing, “But you’re part of the Resistance. His death would benefit your cause.”

Did he know what Kylo had done? Would he help her if he did? She knew Kylo had summoned them, but that was when he was Supreme Leader of the First Order. She decided it would be safer if they knew nothing. If Kylo wanted to tell them he defected, then she would wait for him to do it. “That may be, but I can’t let him die.”

“You love him.” It wasn’t a question. He could see through her as easily as Kylo could.

She nodded. “Please help me save him.”

The Knight was quiet as he studied her. She was certain if he removed his mask, the unease in her belly would disappear. She was certain if he believed her, her bondmate would have a chance. “This bond—can you communicate telepathically? Share abilities and strengths? Contact one another at will?”

“Yes, we can see and speak to each other across the galaxy as if we’re in the room together.”

“Good, we can use that,” he said, his voice deep and emotionless through the vocoder, “to save him.”

She exhaled slowly in relief, biting her lip to hide a smile. “You’ll help me?”

“If you’re telling the truth, then Ben doesn’t have a lot of time.” His eyes lowered to her lightsaber. “But how do I know I can trust you?” She stared down at the hilt of her weapon, considered what it meant to her, then opened her palm, offering it to him.
“Take it. You can trust me; all I want is to save him.”

He was tentative as he took it from her, still not trusting that she had no intention of harming him. He turned to the other Knights. “Let her lead the way. We likely won’t be able to see smoke from the wreckage through the snow, but her bond can lead us to him.”

The intuitive warning was like ice in her veins. “Wreckage?”

The Knight was half paying attention as he examined her lightsaber, latching it on his belt. “If he was shot down in atmosphere, the fighter will be more twisted metal than anything else. But don’t worry, there’s still—”

“I never told you he was shot down.”

For one moment of hope, she still thought they would help her. That is, until they all began to laugh. “Clever girl,” the Knight said, igniting his lightsaber. The others swiftly followed suit. They were supposed to help her save him, but it was clear to her now that was never their intention. They wouldn’t help her; she was running out of time to save her bondmate, and she was weaponless. Knowing she had willingly handed over her lightsaber, her hand reached across her belt out of habit, and her fingers slid across the hilt of another weapon. She had forgotten it. The lightsaber was in her hand and ignited before they had taken another step toward her. The red quillons crackled to life as she pointed the blade at her enemies. There were only three knights, and she liked those odds.

She charged into the group of men, the red lightsabers blending into an indiscernible mass. Releasing her movements to the guidance of the Force, she surrendered herself to the ever-present shadow that hovered over her energy in the Force. Though she had a better respect for the darkness, she knew the power it contained. Her heart pounded in her ears as she let the darkness flow through her, feeding on her fear for Kylo and anger at the people who refused to help her. They were standing in her way; though she was reluctant to take the lives of people who had once meant something to Kylo, if they would prevent her from reaching him, she would kill them. Her strikes were aimed to kill. They blocked and parried every attempt she made at them, until one was able to circle around behind her. He swiped her feet with his boot, and she fell to the ground. The Knight held his lightsaber to her throat.

"We'll take that," he said, as another Knight picked up Kylo's lightsaber that had dropped to the floor. Don’t you touch that! The fury continued to grow inside her. She could feel the heat radiate off her body as she challenged them with her eyes. She could not afford to lose control of her emotions, though she did not fear wounding the Knights by collateral damage, she wouldn’t risk the lives of her friends who were still on the ship. She grit her teeth to suppress the building emotions in the Force. It was nearly impossible to find calm in the darkness when the internal
chrono ticking away at her chance of finding her bondmate was at the forefront of her thoughts.

*Ben, where are you?*

"The Supreme Leader needs the girl alive, Kyp," the second Knight reminded him. *Kyp.* Rey recognized the name immediately. She remained compliant under the threat of the lightsaber to her throat, but she was patient. The second he gave her the opportunity, she would take it. The wait wasn’t long. He deactivated his weapon to forcefully drag her up off the floor. Rey returned the favor by kicking him in the stomach. He released her as he fell away, and the others moved in to contain her. She sent the closest one flying with a push in the Force, leaving an unguarded opening for escape. She took it.

The metal floors echoed under her boots as she sprinted for the boarding ramp. Her friends were still inside the ship, but she would be no help to them if she was captured as well. She needed a weapon…and help. If she could make it to Kylo, she believed he would help her. Though she could not reason with the Knights, she believed he could. They could negotiate for her friend’s release.

Making the final push for freedom, she heard their heavy footsteps behind her as she crossed out into the cold, Ilum night. Knowing the danger of a blinding storm, she allowed the Force to guide her direction. Jumping off the boarding ramp, she was steps away from safety when a large hand caught her arm. She was yanked backward into strong arms. There was something familiar about the black gloves, ribbed tunic, and solid muscle that pinned her to his chest. “Shhhhh,” he whispered like the falling snowflakes in the quiet night.

*Ben.*

The relief that flooded through her drove away the remaining darkness. Not only was he alive, he was awake—standing, talking, holding her tightly against him with no sign of injury. Not only was he seemingly uninjured, he had worked his way across the frozen landscape, through a blizzard to find her. He had come for her; he would help them. A smile crossed her face as her fears subsided. She turned in his arms to find herself staring up at a sickening mask she knew all too well.

*No… it’s impossible!*

Her hand came up to her mouth as she suppressed a gasp. He tilted his head as he watched her intently, but he was otherwise silent and emotionless. When he made no move to explain, she lifted her hands to the helmet, catching the release mechanism. She had to prove to herself that it was him. With a hiss, it slid from his face, the weight of it heavy in her hands.
He had the same dark hair falling over his eyes, same nose, same lips, same furrowed brows. There was something different she couldn’t discern in her shock, something missing that should have been there. Perhaps it was the lack of emotions in his eyes. “Ben?”

“Supreme Leader Kylo Ren,” he answered impassively.

“No, it can’t be.

“How? How is this possible? You were practically dead in the snow, Ben! And now you’re… you’re…” Her eyes fell to the helmet in her hands. “Did they find you? Is this because of them?

He was quiet as he studied her, chewing his words as he considered them. There was no brush of his energy against her mind, he wasn’t attempting to discern her thoughts, but he was trying to understand something. “Come with me; I’ll explain everything.”

*I don’t want you to explain anything, Ben. I want you to leave here with me and never go back. You were supposed to help me stop the Knights, not join them. “What about my friends?”*

“They can come back to the Finalizer with us.”

“I thought…” she choked back tears. “I thought you left the First Order!”

“The war is not over yet. I need your help.” Her breath caught in her throat as he said the words she had longed to hear. “Will you help me?”

“Yes.”

“Then come with me.” He didn’t wait for an answer, instead, he grasped her by the arm and guided her away from the ship in the opposite direction she had been running. She went with him willingly, but unease grew in her gut. He was walking quickly, purposefully, through the snow,
and she struggled to keep up with his long strides. She tripped and he held her up, but there was not one twitch of a smile in reassurance, his gaze did not break from the path ahead.

It felt wrong.

She felt as she had when he had guided her to the Supreme Leader in the throne room. He was determined, dutiful, and obedient; he was nothing like the man she had come to know, the man she thought had changed. She loved him, but as he refused to look at her, the distrust in her grew. The sharp, angular lines of the command shuttle came into view, and the Force began screaming inside her. She couldn’t ignore her intuition any longer.

“Where are my friends?” She stopped short, refusing to move another step. Met with resistance, he turned to face her.

He was quiet as he searched her eyes, the frustration clear in his. “They’re right behind us,” he said. It didn’t feel like a lie, but he wouldn’t look at her when he said the words.

She studied his profile as he stared off into falling snow, not once looking back at her. “Where are we going?”

“I told you,” he said impatiently, “back to the Finalizer.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“I’ll explain after you get on the shuttle!”

“No, Ben, you will explain it now. You at least owe me that.” He growled in response, and she expected to feel his anger spill over into the bond. It was unsettling when she didn’t feel any of the emotions she could clearly see rising in him. A quick venture into the Force revealed that the bond was still there, though not nearly as strong as it should have been in his presence. The connection between them was limp, in a way it shouldn’t have been with him fully conscious. It was the pull from the bond itself that was unmistakable; it was tugging her back toward the *Millennium Falcon*. That was impossible if he was standing right in front of her; the bond should have been tugging her toward *him*.

With a dawning understanding, she called the blaster at his hip into her hand. It was not lost on her
that she had never once seen him carry a blaster. When the weapon slapped into her palm, and he hadn’t tried to stop her with the Force, she knew something was terribly wrong. Even when she raised the weapon, he made no effort to mount a counterattack. He couldn’t, she realized, as she reached out to his energy in suspicion. It wasn’t what she felt in him that concerned her, but what she didn’t.

*He’s shut out the Force.*

Her eyes snapped up to scan his face, trying to find an explanation for what he had done to cut himself off from the Force, and why. It was then that she realized what had been different about his face, what had been *missing*. Her finger found the trigger of the blaster as she searched in vain for what she knew should have been there. *His scar.*

“You’re not Ben,” she whispered.

He seemed incredibly unruffled and sarcastic for a man with a blaster pointed at his chest. “What?”

“Who are you?” Her voice quivered in apprehension. If this was not her bondmate, then that meant he was somewhere out there, presumably still injured and unconscious in the blizzard. “Where is the real Ben?”

Fear. It was fear that crossed his eyes. She couldn’t feel it in the bond, but she knew the microexpressions of her bondmate well enough to recognize them in this man that could be his…

*Clone.*

A small twitch of resignation and acceptance formed on the corner of his lips. He may not have been sensitive to the Force, but he must have seen the realization in her face; he knew what she would do. “He’s dead.”

The single blastershot echoed across the frozen terrain.
Chapter End Notes

Death

Rey kills someone who looks like Kylo
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
The Hutts had complicated the battle, but the rebellion still had hope. It was one of the oddest battles Poe had ever had the displeasure to take part in. He would assist a Hutt cruiser to destroy several TIE fighters, and a few minutes later he would assist a TIE fighter to destroy a Hutt yacht. When the Hutts became hostile, the largest challenge was determining which other ships in the mismatched assortment were friendly.

Poe knew the Hutts were far from trustworthy, but he still couldn’t discern the motive behind their betrayal. To watch the galaxy burn? What he did know was that, although the Hutts had changed their allegiance, one thing hadn’t changed. They were only fighting for revenge, not survival. Once the Resistance had begun firing back, several of their ships fled. All they needed was a little help from the team on Ilum and they could still win. Abandoning the dogfight, he sped for the Finalizer. With some well-placed hits—and a lot of luck—he could cripple the destroyer.

"Black Leader, we have had some... significant news come through over the comms," Poe’s commander announced.

"Go ahead," he answered, aiming for a set of starboard affixed turbolaser turrets on the battlecruiser.

"We have intercepted reports that three members of the Resistance were captured on Ilum. The hostages were brought onboard the Finalizer by the Knights of Ren," he informed the general.

"They have Rey...Kylo Ren must have found her," Poe slammed his fist down in anger...and guilt. His plan had failed. “Why didn’t Finn take him down when he had the chance!”

"Sir, there is more. Kylo Ren was confirmed over comms to be piloting a lone TIE superiority fighter toward the surface of Ilum; the words ‘traitor’ and ‘mutiny’ were used. The fighter is confirmed shot down in atmosphere over Ilum, sir; by all accounts Kylo Ren is dead. There is a new Supreme Leader already reportedly heard giving orders over comms." The distraction of the unexpected news proved nearly fatal, as Poe was barely able to bank away from another fighter at the last second.

"What?” Poe stammered, “Are you sure? How did they shift the command so quickly? They should be a headless snake!”
"Early reports suggest Kylo Ren voluntarily relinquished command before he was shot down. The new Supreme Leader is also referred to as Kylo Ren, sir. We believe they have implemented an imposter. It is possible Kylo Ren was never one person at all, but rather an illusion or propaganda tool."

"The early reports must be wrong. That’s impossible, I know who Kylo Ren is," Poe reasoned. He fired upon the star destroyer in anger and realized—as he blankly searched for the destruction left behind by the explosions he had created—that they had left no damage. He saw the fireballs, but once the smoke cleared, there was no damage. Every destroyer had a deflector shield, but, at close range, the shield should have been useless to protect the surface cannons. It should have been; just as the Hutts should have been their allies, the death of Kylo Ren should have created a power vacuum, and his friends on Ilum should have been safe.

His own heavy breathing filled the cockpit as he took stock of the battle. They were outmanned, outgunned, and they were suffering heavy losses from two different enemies. The First Order was not falling apart. The loss of Kylo Ren did nothing to their command structure. They were as prepared as they were merciless. His friends were prisoners of war, likely dead whether the Resistance found their miracles or not. He watched as fighters, shuttles, and freighters were destroyed. He heard the screams of the dying over the comms. He was responsible for every last soul, and he was losing them.

“Hope is like the sun,” he reminded himself. He shuddered as the fighter to his right exploded.

“I know you’re out there, Leia,” he whispered. “Please...help us.”
The Truth

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Kylo opened his eyes to the cool sands of a desert. It was barren and endless…and unforgivingly warm for a desert night. There was enough light from the night sky to recognize the peaks and shadows as dunes of sand as far as the eye could see. There were two suns just below the horizon, leaving a red haze in the sky. He didn’t know whether it was sunset or sunrise—not that it mattered. It would be beautiful if he wasn’t dead. Kylo hated everything about this place. He didn’t know how Rey survived in Jakku for nearly two decades.

Rey.
Had he failed her? Had he not been strong enough to save her? His heart clenched at the thought of her light gone from the galaxy. If being stuck in a barren wasteland was his punishment for the lifetime of being a monster, so be it. But he didn’t think he could spend the rest of eternity, suffering in a desert, believing that she hadn’t survived. Rey had convinced herself of a pretty delusion in a forsaken desert world, why couldn’t he?

“You didn’t need a desert to convince yourself of delusions, Ben.”

Kylo turned to see a man kneeling in the sand next to him, fixing a speeder. The stranger was staring at him expectantly, waiting for him to respond to his statement. Kylo could have sworn the man hadn’t been there when he first arrived, but he was dead, so perhaps that explained how it worked in this place.

The first feature Kylo noticed about the stranger was his eyes. They were a piercing blue. His right eye was bisected by a scar, similar to Kylo’s. The man looked to be around his age, but his eyes seemed wise and filled with far more hope than he could ever imagine having.

The second observation Kylo made was that the man had hair nearly as long as his, but it was closer to the color of the sand around them. The third was his robes. Kylo would have guessed him to be a Jedi based on his robes—admirable choices of dark brown and black—but if he was a Jedi, he was missing his lightsaber. He couldn’t be a Jedi, because a Jedi would never be caught without his weapon.

The last thing he noticed was his glove, only on his right hand. In death, the man could not have projected with both gloves? Or neither? Kylo stared at his own hands; he was missing both of his gloves. And his lightsaber. The man was still staring at him expectantly, so Kylo asked the first thing that came to mind. “Is this Hell?”

“Might as well be,” the other man chuckled. “Tatooine. It was my home once.”

Kylo squinted at the endless dunes of sand. “I’m sorry.”

The man shrugged as he turned to a bag of tools. “I don’t think where you come from matters as much as where you’re going.” Kylo brushed the sand from his dark clothes in frustration. It had to be Hell. Why else would he be stuck with a strange man who spoke as cryptically as Luke on a hot, desert world, surrounded in all directions by mountains of sand? The man watched him with an air of amusement. When Kylo glared at him, the man turned back to his work. “I hate sand, too,” he said.
Kylo gestured to the dunes in a grand display. “So this is hell, then.”

“Can you hand me that hydrospanner?” the man asked, nodding to the tool that was clearly within reach. Kylo studied him with narrowed eyes but ultimately acquiesced. With a twitch of his fingers, he retrieved the tool and passed it to him with aid of the Force. When he had first done that to his father, the older Solo had reacted with exasperation. When he had done it to Lando, he had reacted with wonderment. The man with the sand-colored hair nodded in gratitude, but otherwise didn’t react to the display. It confirmed one of Kylo’s suspicions; the man was intimately familiar with the Force. He didn’t speak until he returned to his work. “Can you help me with this?”

“I know nothing about speeders,” Kylo warned, but the man didn’t respond. With a sigh, he begrudgingly lowered himself to his knees in the sand. He had the rest of eternity; he could help a dead man fix a non-existent speeder. Besides, there was something about this stranger that intrigued him.

“Would you prefer a TIE?”

Kylo turned to the man, who smiled with a glint of humor in his eyes. Was he teasing him? Kylo wondered what exactly he knew about him. When he turned back to the speeder, his stare was met with a wall of black. Where the speeder had once been, stood the starboard wing of a TIE Superiority fighter, partly submerged in the sand.

*How did he….*

He narrowed his eyes, immediately distrustful of the confirmed Force-sensitive. Who was this man? What did he want from him? Nothing made sense. “If you can do that, why in the galaxy would you bring us here?”

“Your mind brought us to Tatooine, not me, Ben,” the man answered as he stepped around the sharply angled wing and disappeared beneath the lower chassis of the fighter. His voice carried from the darkness of the underbelly. “Maybe you should ask yourself why you brought us here.”

“I didn’t bring us here; I’ve never even been here before,” Kylo shouted after him. When there wasn’t a response, he huffed, pivoting to view the barren landscape around him. Nothing. No one. His only answers were with the stranger who knew far more about Kylo than Kylo did him. Standing before the familiar cockpit, he released the clasp on his cloak in agitation and ducked underneath the black durasteel frame of the wing pylon. He knelt beside the cockpit until his stare
met eyes that seemed awfully familiar for a stranger. “And that’s the second time you called me ‘Ben.’”

The man was on his back, loosening the bolts to the ventral access panel. “I think the more important part was that you ‘didn’t need a desert to convince yourself of delusions.”

Was this a test? Was he stuck in that wasteland until the man assigned to assess him determined whether he was worthy of an afterlife? He could have saved everyone the trouble and assured them he wasn’t. He would have gone to hell before he admitted what this man likely wanted from him. “What was my delusion?” he sighed. “That my family loved me? That anyone wanted me for anything other than my power? That I wasn’t destined to become like my grandfather?”

“No.” There was a somberness to the steely blue eyes when they trailed to his. “Those were perhaps the only ones that were not delusions, Ben.”

Clenching his jaw, Kylo turned his head away to stare out at the vast expanse of sand. “Ah, because you know so much about me and my family.”

“More than you think,” the man said, returning to his work, “I was a Jedi. I knew your grandfather and your uncle Luke.”

“Were you?” He doubted this man was older than him. How did he know Luke, let alone his grandfather, whose life ended a year before Kylo even existed?

“I died before you were born,” he added, as if he had heard Kylo’s thoughts.

Drumming on the hull, Kylo hummed noncommittally. “You sure know a lot about Superiority fighters for someone who died decades before they were created.”

The man laughed something carefree and full of mirth, if the squinted eyes and toothy grin were anything to go by. It looked familiar. It reminded him of Luke. “I know you didn’t get that sarcasm from the Skywalker side.”

“Then you’ve never met my uncle…or my mother,” Kylo muttered. There was something somber or regretful that fell over the other man’s face. Likely because he had been caught in a lie. “Perhaps you don’t know as much about me or my family as you think.”
“I know your family loved you, but someone convinced you they didn’t,” the man said.

Kylo pushed off the cockpit and stood. He couldn’t stand another minute with this man, much less the rest of eternity. “Abandonment, lying, and betrayal is an interesting way of showing it,” he replied in parting. He chose a direction, not that it particularly mattered, and set off through the sand.

“Yes, they failed you, but your family was trying to protect you from the creature whispering in your ear,” the man called after him from under the ship, “or, in your case, your head.”

Kylo stopped. Did he know what his former master had done to him? He knew then that it wasn’t the Force’s intention for him to escape. Perhaps the only obstacle between him and final peace was one last conversation with this man. That didn’t mean Kylo would agree with anything this man had to say, however. “You’re right,” he said, tone high with pretentious levity, “Luke was protecting me by trying to kill me.”

“Luke…listened to the darkness, to the fear,” came the reply. “Yoda said, ‘Fear leads to anger—’”

“Anger leads to hate, and hate leads to suffering.’ I’ve heard it,” Kylo sighed, allowing himself to drop to the sand beside the cockpit.

“He also said train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose. Your grandfather couldn’t do it, and neither could Luke; that was their own undoing. He also warned me to be careful when sensing the future. Everything they did to prevent it caused it to happen.”

Kylo stared out at the horizon. “Comforting.”

“As for your belief that no one wanted you for anything other than your power,” the man continued over the sounds of metal grinding against metal, “what about the girl?”

At his words, Kylo turned toward the stranger. “Rey?” The other man was still on his back, arms raised as he used two hands to apply enough leverage with the hydrospanner to open one of the internal compartments. When he didn’t answer, Kylo crawled closer through the sand. “Is she alive?”
“If you help me with this,” the man groaned through clenched teeth, “then I’ll tell you.” With sand getting everywhere, Kylo slid underneath the cockpit to the man’s side. They both coughed as a wave of sand splashed over their faces. The man groaned again, though this time it was more in irritation than effort. “You take the hydrospanner to work this thing loose, and I’ll catch the plasma chamber that’s blocking the relay.” Kylo snatched the tool from his hand and—with a little help from the Force—he wrenched open the compartment and Anakin reached in for the plasma chamber. Disconnecting it and setting it aside, he sorted through the relay manifold.

“He took the hydrospanner too,” the dead man beside him said. “She didn’t want you for your power.”

“Semantics.” Kylo’s eyes remained closed as he answered. He folded his hands underneath his head.

The sparks above them stopped for a moment. In the following silence, Kylo opened his eyes to find the man’s head turned, staring at him. “She loves you.”

He was wrong, Kylo knew he was wrong, and that was what hurt. She would never love him, and the memories she did have of him, would be of a monster. “She blocked me out of the bond, she hated me.”
“Do you love her?”

“We are…we were bonded,” Kylo answered, staring at the opened compartment above them. “That is stronger than any definition you have of love.”

Sensing his discomfort, the other man returned to his work. “So you do—love her.”

Kylo chewed his lip as he thought about admitting something so significant. He had too many questions to answer. Was it possible to truly love someone if she did not return the sentiment? Was he even capable of love? He chose the easiest question. “Does it matter?”

The man shrugged again as blue sparks streaked from the tool. “I’d like to think so.”

Even if the answer to all his questions was yes, he couldn’t bring himself to admit in death what he hadn’t been capable of recognizing in life. A memory of her laughing flashed in his mind, which soothed the ache of never seeing her again. Remembering her restored the warm, flighty feeling he felt whenever her expression softened and she looked at him like someone worthy. He smiled. “Just being around her is—”

“—Intoxicating?”

“No, the opposite,” he whispered. It wasn’t until he turned to the ghostly stranger that he realized the man had been staring at him, complete with a smile on his face.

“What I mean is,” a hiss interrupted the man’s words as he burned himself with the tool. He shook his hand, and something about the way he muttered to himself before continuing reminded Kylo of his mother. “When I was with…my wife, my mind was not my own. I couldn’t be rational or control my feelings. It was agony. She was in my very soul—tormenting me. I was blind to everything but my love for her.”

*That’s how I feel when Rey’s not with me.*

“No,” Kylo said, reaching up to secure the broken relay to simplify and expedite the man’s weld. “When she’s actually with me, my mind is clear, everything is clear. I can see through the anger and the hate that had become such a part of me, I thought there was no other way to be. The things I was so sure were right didn’t feel as right anymore. She calms me. She gives me…hope.”
The man smiled. “Good. Would you do anything for her?”

“Yes, I would,” he murmured. “I did.”

The stranger was quiet for a moment, and he thought maybe that was it; that was what he was supposed to admit so he could move on to whatever was next. When the man turned to him with consequence in his eyes, he looked almost sorrowful. Evidently, it wasn’t the answer the man was looking for, but Kylo wasn’t expecting the words he said next. “So did I, Ben, but it didn’t turn out the way I thought. Sidious and the darkness promised me everything I could have ever wanted.”

“Sidious?”

Had there been others like him? Did this man know what it was like to have his thoughts and fears twisted by the monster? Did he fear the creature’s return as profoundly as Kylo did? The dead man’s stare returned above him as he finished welding the relay. He spoke with a levity that didn’t correspond with the severity of the topic. “You know the name?”

“Unfortunately.”

“He used you for your strength, Ben, didn’t he?” the man pried knowingly. “He lied to you about who you were, your destiny, what your grandfather’s legacy was.”

Kylo released the relay, feeling the overwhelming desire to run. He knew, he knew that his former master had lied him, but to hear it from someone else made it all too real. “What do you want from me?”

“It’s not what I want from you,” the blonde-haired man replied, setting down his tool. “It’s what you need from me. The truth. I’m here to tell you the truth. Your grandfather was led astray by fear, anger, and lust for power. He wanted to be the best Jedi ever, he wanted the Jedi Order to let him become the powerful Jedi he knew he could be, he wanted to live up to the prophecy foretold of his future. He disagreed with the Council, but his fall began with his fears of what he’d seen in his visions. He had a vision of his mother, and he couldn’t save her. Then he had a vision of his wife dying in childbirth and promised himself he wouldn’t fail her, too. The man talking in his ear promised the dark side had the power to stop people from dying. If he turned, the man would give your grandfather the power to save her. In his darkness, he turned his back on his wife, and that inevitably led to her death.”
The man paused, swallowing thickly. Kylo could see the weight of his words in his glistening eyes. Who were these people to him? Had he truly known them? Had he gone into hiding, or did Anakin kill him too? “The one thing he had tried to prevent came true, because he listened to the darkness. He became a monster. Only his son made him see who he truly was. Your grandfather’s destiny was not the Empire. His destiny was to right what he had wronged. He sent the galaxy into chaos when he fell to darkness in the fear of losing the woman he loved. Because of that fear, he betrayed her and lost her. His destiny was to finally bring balance to the Force by destroying it all… out of love for the one person who saw the light in him. He lost his soulmate in his fall to darkness, but he saved his family in his return to the light. You fell to darkness because you feared you had lost everyone you loved. Not to death, but betrayal. By turning, you betrayed them. You can destroy it all and bring balance to the Force…if your love for her is stronger than your fear. You lost your family in your fall to darkness, but you can save her—and yourself—if you return to the light. There is still hope for the galaxy.

“You left the First Order to save her,” the man continued, “you gave your life for hers, but that’s not enough to stop the First Order or save the galaxy. That’s not enough to save you. What you’ve suffered…you’re lost Ben, but it’s not too late. You have to see the truth, good and bad, of who your grandfather was. Your grandfather wouldn’t have wanted any of this, for his children, or his grandson.”

Kylo hummed. “If you know what he wanted, you must have known him well.”

“You could say that,” the man said with a wan smile.

“Then you would know my grandfather wanted to bring justice, order –”

“Peace and freedom for the galaxy, yes, I’ve heard,” the man answered with a chuckle. “He realized too late that the darkness was not the way to do that. He told himself that everything he did was for the woman loved, even when it was against everything she stood for. He fell to darkness to save her; you left for it. Maybe you are like your grandfather; maybe you will face your fears to do the right thing. Leaving the First Order—maybe you didn’t do it all for her, maybe there was a part of you that wanted to be something more.”

“You think I did it for myself?” Kylo called the fusing pen to his hand in agitation. “I’m dead. I knew I would die if I left. It wasn’t for me, and if this is some attempt to save my soul, give it a rest. I don’t want to be saved.”

Kylo refused to glance over to gauge his reaction. He fused the relay without the procrastination exhibited by the man next to him. The man didn’t comment even when the sizzle of energy and
sparks subsided to silence. Kylo opened his left palm in request for the plasma chamber. When he was met with silence—and an emptiness in his hand—he turned to the other man and found disappointment in his eyes. “You could have protected her better if you stayed,” he said, “so why did you leave? Why did you give up what you sacrificed everything for?”

“Why did I leave?” Kylo scoffed. He manipulated the plasma chamber to his hand as it became clear that the man had no intention of handing it to him. His delicate placement of it inside the compartment was incongruous with the irritation he felt prickling under his skin. “Why did he? He turned to darkness and betrayed the woman he loved. For what? She loved him. He had everything I ever wanted.”

“Is that everything—love?” the man next to him murmured.

With hands inside the compartment above him, Kylo paused. “It’s all a monster like me had ever hoped for.”

“He loved her so much, he didn’t care if she hated him; he just wanted to do what was best for her.” Reaching up to help him secure the overhead panel, the man’s glare was heavy with implication. “Sound familiar?”

“Then when she died…why did he fall further? How did he live with that?”

“He told himself in the beginning, it was all to save her,” the ghostly stranger replied, “but when she died, he still walked the path into darkness. He had already sacrificed too much; nothing could bring back the dead. It would have all been for nothing if he turned back.”

As he used the hydrospanner to bolt the panel back into place, Kylo thought of Han, of his insistence of the very same belief. “Maybe her death would have been for nothing if he didn’t turn back.” Shifting his shoulder, Kylo revealed the man’s encouraging smile. Kylo didn’t know what difference it made when he was dead, but perhaps it was what had given him that perspective. “Tell me something. If my grandfather wanted to save her, why did he kill her?”

“He used the Force against her in his jealousy and anger and darkness, and that betrayal of their love ultimately caused her death, even if it wasn’t his intention.” He was quiet for a long moment, and when Kylo turned to study him, there emotion glistened in his eyes. “But he did love her, Ben; he loved her more than anything else. He was blind. He let the entire galaxy suffer so he could save her…and lost her anyway. What would you do to save the girl?”
"People make terrible mistakes, Ben," the man continued. "What your grandfather did to her was unforgivable, but that doesn’t change that friends, lovers, fathers, mothers, uncles—people make mistakes. They listen to their darkness. It doesn’t mean they didn’t love you. It doesn’t mean you weren’t good enough."

“Stop pretending like you know me!” Kylo tightened the last bolt so strongly he nearly snapped it off. When he was finished, he slammed the hydrospanner against the panel in anger. “You know nothing about my family or my destiny or me! Why should I care what you say!?"

“Because you asked me to show you, and then you would finish what I started. The power of the darkness, the empire, the bloodshed is not what I started; that is not what I wanted for you. Family, love, protecting the galaxy…this is what I started.” Gathering the Force inside himself, Kylo shoved the entire TIE fighter ten meters away in his agitation and jumped to his feet.

“How did you…? I didn’t ask you!” he shouted through shuddering breaths. “I asked my grandfather!”

He turned his attention to the heavens. “I’m done with these stupid mind games!” he shouted to whoever in the Cosmic Force was listening. “Take me away from here!”

A deep, electronic wheezing sound broke the silence. When Kylo pivoted back toward the man standing behind him, he had been replaced by a familiar figure in all black—familiar from holobooks, holorecordings, and the holonet. He was powerful, imposing, and real. Half man, half machine.

_Darth Vader._

“You’re still holding onto your denial. Deep down you know the truth; you’ve always known. It’s always been right there in front of you, but you were too blinded by hate to see it,” the mechanical voice rasped. “Ben, I am not your grandfather.”

The apparition changed before his eyes into the young, blonde-haired stranger.
“I am.”

Chapter End Notes

Discussion of death
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story is 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
A clone, Rey realized. *When Ben created the clone army, he must have cloned...himself.*

A question Kylo had asked when he had first discovered that she had given the vial to Poe replayed in her mind. *He didn’t tell you, did he? What those clones looked like?* She had wondered why it mattered, but now it made sense. He wanted to know if she knew Poe had killed *his* genetic copies. The Kaminoans required DNA to create the clones, of course, and, in his attempt at secrecy, he had used his own. Then, under his instruction, they created the virus to attack the clones’ DNA; *his* DNA. That vial could have killed him, too. He had trusted her with his life, and she had willingly handed it over to a man who would have gladly used it against him. Poe did use it against the clones, but he must not have killed them all. This clone must have been the First Order’s contingency plan if Kylo ever deserted or...died.

She stared at the prone body of the former Supreme Leader. His likeness to the man she loved made her stomach turn, as crimson leached into the snow around him. She couldn’t stop the thought from forming, *this is what Ben would look like dead.* It could have easily been her bondmate lying there in the snow if he hadn’t chosen to leave the First Order.

*It could easily be Ben now,* her dark thoughts further convinced her, *he could be dead in the snow just like this because he made the choice to leave the First Order.* If the clone had been telling the truth, the man she knew was dead, no different from the lifeless body at her feet. Staring down at his familiar face made it all the more real. She had to find him. All she knew was the bond was pulling her back toward his father’s ship.

Focused on formalizing a plan, the strike to the back of her head came as a surprise. She was able to remain standing due to her grasp on the Force, but the world tilted and whirled around her. “Can you handle the girl this time, Corran?” A modulated voice behind her huffed as he wrapped his arms around her waist, immobilizing her.

“She doesn’t know, can you, *Kyp?*” A Knight stepped up into her peripheral vision, wrestling her hands into shackles. The second the shackles were around her wrists, the power flowing through her disappeared. She attempted to call the blaster that lay abandoned in the snow, but it didn’t so much as twitch from her will. In a split second, they had effectively cut her off from the Force. As long as the shackles suppressed her sensitivity, she was at a great disadvantage against them.

The third Knight, the one who had lied to her before, circled around in front of her. His eyes were
hidden behind his mask, but she felt them studying her, searching for her greatest weaknesses. She quickly discerned he was the leader. “She won’t be going anywhere this time if she wants her friends to survive the night.” In one sentence he had placed the fate of friends solely in her hands. Anyone else would comply. She knew the shackles would impede her escape and the potential rescue of her bondmate. Venturing out into the storm came with heavy risk, even without the hindrance, but she knew that if she and her friends were taken back to the Finalizer, their chances of survival were slim. She wouldn’t leave any of her friends to die out there alone; she wouldn’t allow Kylo to suffer that fate either. The Knight could threaten her all he wanted, but she wouldn’t go with them willingly.

“Master Caedus, is that...Kylo Ren?” Kyp nodded in the clone’s direction. The others turned, but she was more focused on the name. Kyp, Corran, she knew those names from his memories, but Caedus? How many Knights are there? Sidious could have had an entire force-sensitive army. I don’t know about. Has he brought back more than Maul for his Dark Army?

A chuckle rasped through the vocoder in Caedus’s helmet as he turned to find the clone sprawled in the snow. She imagined if there were creatures from Hell, that laugh was what it would they would sound like. “Perceptive,” he said. “How did you know it wasn’t your Ben?”

“I know Ben's dead,” Rey probed, hoping they wouldn’t confirm her fears. “If you know they shot his fighter down, then you know where he is. You wouldn’t risk me finding him when you had that clone. You killed him, didn’t you?”

“That's what happens,” Corran growled, “when you commit treason and betray the Order by killing Supreme Leader Snoke for a girl.” She swallowed her rising fears. They know.

Caedus continued to quietly study her. She sensed he was monitoring her emotions closely—to what end, she wasn’t sure yet. “You’re wrong, you know.” He turned and began walking back toward the freighter. “I’ll prove it to you.”

“Wrong about what?” He didn’t answer, not even bothering to glance back as he walked toward her friends. “Hey! Wrong about what?” He hadn’t asked her to follow him, nor did she find it particularly wise, but Rey had to know. The Force called to her, so she marched into the snow after him, the other Knights following closely behind her. As they neared the looming ship in the darkness, she was briefly reunited with Finn and Rose, who were also being held prisoner by three Knights. The Knight behind her held her back as Caedus disappeared into the snowfall, heading for the far side of the ship. He reappeared moments later, the snowfall obscuring him into a silhouette, but it was clear he was dragging something…or someone. As he drew closer, she recognized the limp body immediately.

“Ben!”
They must have found him first. And dragged him here. How long had he been right outside?

His chest was bare and exposed to the snow. His dark hair was wet, plastered across his forehead and sticking to the blood covering the right half of his face. He looked just as he had over the bond, though he was missing a particular astromech droid who would not have willingly left his side. Her stomach rolled at the thought of what they must have done to the droid…and what they would do to his master.

The Knight to her left, Corran, stepped forward, crossing the snow to kneel beside Kylo. “He’s alive.” Thank the Force. Relief flooded through her; there was still hope. The Knight stood, shaking his head as he laughed, "Look at the fearsome Jedi Killer. Not so powerful now, are you, Kylo?" She winced as the Knight kicked Kylo as hard as he could in the side, a dark chuckle rumbling behind his mask.

"Stop!" Rey cried, turning to push and kick at her captor as she struggled to escape. Caedus stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her from behind, pinning her arms so she could do little to struggle against him. Spinning them both around to face her bondmate, he pulled her closer to him until he was pressed up against her. The lead Knight's hands wandered over her body. Disgust rose like bile in her throat. She turned her face away from his, staring up at the dark sky in defiance. For the first time, she noticed the battle taking place above their heads. The allied forces had shown up. Ships and fighters were swarming the Finalizer.

"We're heading up there, soon enough," he rasped in her ear, "But first I'm going to kill your boyfriend."

"No!" She screamed. She twisted out of the Knight's grasp, struggling through the snow until she slid to Kylo's side. "Ben, you have to wake up...please!" She shook him desperately with her shackled hands, but he was unresponsive to her pleas. Caedus had been only steps behind her and swiftly ripped her away from him. “Let go of me!” He dragged her through the snow as she kicked at him, screaming for her bondmate. “Ben! Wake up! Please!”

Caedus pulled her upright, grasping her by both shoulders so she was forced to stare into the visor of his mask. “She wants us to wake him...let's wake him. Jaina, get the glitterstim.” He broke his scrutiny of her long enough to nod to one of the other Knights. He spun Rey around again, pressing her against him. His left arm stretched across her waist, and his right arm pressed tightly against her chest, grasping her chin roughly to immobilize her.

*If Ben was awake right now, he’d kill you for touching me like this...I’ll kill you for touching me like this.*
"It seems fitting; we're going to overdose your boyfriend on the very spice his father smuggled out of Kessel," he whispered in her ear. "He hated his father for what he did to the galaxy. I'm sure your little rebellion would find that quite hypocritical considering his current position—or what was his current position before you got in his head—but I happen to agree with him; spice controls more of the galaxy than the First Order ever will. There's nothing like it...." She could hear his obscene breathing through the mask as his hands wandered over her body. "It gives the user a telepathic boost, heightened mental state, and increased body temperature in small doses..." He laughed wickedly, pressing himself firmly against her as she squirmed away from his touch.

"...But in the injections we will give him, his consciousness will be increased just enough for him to access the Force, drawing enough energy from it to be fully aware as he overdoses very slowly over the next hour or so. We will make sure your Ben suffers as much as possible." She spun around in his grasp to strike him, but he caught her by the arm. He ran the back side of his gloved hand down the side of her face.

"You're very pretty, for a scavenger; I can see why he was...seduced...by you." She spat onto his mask in defiance, hate burning in her blood. He huffed a laugh and tilted his head to stare up at the fight waging above their heads, but he made no move to wipe it from his visor as he continued. "It's a shame you'll have to die. We could have had some fun together. I could have made you forget his name."

"I would rather die."

"That," he chuckled darkly, "can be arranged."

Jaina returned promptly with two hypodermic injectors containing a black, opaque substance. "No!" She would not stand by and allow them to inject that poison into his veins. Without the Force, there was only so much she could do against them. Rey bit and kicked and swung; she struggled and fought with Caedus, but he would not release her from his grasp.

"Don't touch him!" she screamed, imagining the woman underneath the mask, the woman who had stolen a kiss from her bondmate. Jaina paused, turning her head toward Rey as though she had said her thoughts aloud. Jaina’s hair cascaded down her back as she removed her helmet. A wicked grin stretched across her face.

"Don't touch him? Oh, scavenger, I already have. Over and over again. We know each other very intimately. Did he not tell you about us?" Jaina mused, pouting her lip. She swung her black leather-clad leg over his hip to straddle him, icy blue eyes locked with Rey’s. Her gloved hands caressed his bare chest as she leaned over him, her hair framing his face as she kissed his
reposed lips passionately. Rey’s stomach churned as she looked away from the display.

“Gross, Jaina. Do you know where that’s been?” Caedus teased. Why does that sound so familiar? Caedus turned back to Rey, pressing himself against her suggestively. “Or maybe we do?” His sickening laugh rasped next to her ear. Something dark and possessive ignited inside her. She wanted nothing more than to do what she did to Kylo the last time they were in the snow together. This time she wouldn’t stop.

“I don’t think he’s touched her,” Jaina realized. “Has he, scavenger? He couldn’t bring himself to touch something so repulsive.” Rey held her glare, hot tears stinging her eyes in the cold night. The air around her did nothing to cool the fire building inside her.

“You know you were just a bet, right? Between the Knights?” Jaina continued. “After you sliced open his face, he was convinced he could seduce you to the dark side. But you must have known; you couldn’t be that naïve. Why else would the leader of the galaxy—who already had a woman who gave him everything he wanted—desire a desert rat like you? You’re a nobody. He just wanted your power.”

Liar!

Her mind, however, supplied every moment between them, the darkness twisting their interactions in her fear. His patience with her on Ahch-To, his refusal to wear a cowl, his gentle words ensuring she was not alone; could it have all been an attempt to manipulate her? She thought about the important things he had kept from her, like the death of her parents, that he likely never would have told her if she hadn’t discovered it.

As if responding to Rey’s thought, Jaina smiled. “He told us all about you, scavenger. He told us how furious he had been when you split open his face, but he pretended like it was nothing as he manipulated you. He said it was easy, because your greatest weakness was that you were looking for family everywhere. Every time he saw you, when you called him a monster, when he bared his chest to you, when he touched your hand, when he begged you to join him…it all repulsed him. Then it became more than a bet. He wanted to get close to you so he could kill your friends. He watched the darkness turn you. He said he knew you would be easy because of what happened to your parents. He wanted to use you and then abandon you like the garbage you are; to break you in revenge for what you had done to him.”

“That’s not true!” Rey shouted through tears, but she didn’t sound convincing even to herself. How could she know about what happened between us unless he told her?
Jaina’s smile grew wider. “Still don’t believe me? Here, I’ll show you.” With a flick of her hand, her energy pushed past Rey’s shackled defenses. At first, Rey thought she was sifting through her memories, but this felt different than when Kylo had invaded her mind. Instead of searching, she felt the energy spread into her thoughts like poison. Flashes and images played unbidden in her mind.

There were memories of Ben and Jaina at the Jedi temple, much as they were positioned now, their tongues dancing as she kissed him. His large hands slid over her body, pulling her closer as he moved against her. You are everything I could ever want, he told her. Rey tried to force the memory from her mind, but the Force-suppression hindered her attempts. She watched flashes of them, bodies entangled, knowing each other in ways Rey had never imagined. The acts continued from the Jedi temple to the First Order. Kylo covered every last inch of himself, but he bared himself for his fellow Knight. Still, it wasn’t the physical relationship that hurt the most. It was the words he said to her the last time they had seen each other, sitting on the Throne as Supreme Leader. You’re not alone, Jai, I love you.

The memories faded away as she did her best to swallow her despair. Her body shook with the effort, which Caedus found to be hilarious. Jaina laughed with him. “Too much for you to take, slave girl?”

It doesn’t matter about the past, she told herself. I know he could never love me, but he’s bonded to me, and he left the First Order. I will save him. Still, she couldn’t allow Jaina to win.

“I must have missed the part,” she drawled. “Where he asked you to join him.”

Jaina’s piercing eyes were narrowed in contempt, but she didn’t waste her time with a witty comeback. Instead, she bit the caps off the hyper-injectors and, without preamble, plunged them into Kylo’s bare chest. “No!” Rey screamed, her voice echoing into the night. Her legs collapsed out from under her, but Caedus held her up to watch the death invade her bondmate’s bloodstream. She could see the black substance spreading from the injection point, contaminating and interweaving through his network of blood vessels. His entire chest was covered in an onyx tree of death, twisting and branching further into his body. I’ll kill you, she promised. I’ll kill you both. If she could access the Force, she would have found the darkness and unleashed her wrath on them both. Without the Force, there were too many of them, and all she could do was watch.

The tension was broken by a wheezing gasp from Kylo’s blue lips.
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Physical and sexual violence toward Rey. She touched suggestively and restrained forcefully.

Jealousy

Rey experiences jealousy toward a female.

Implied sexual situations

Images of alleged sexual acts are forced into Rey's thoughts by someone else.
Non-consensual kiss

Kylo is kissed while unconscious

Violence

Kylo is poisoned
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No!” Kylo staggered backward in the sand, away from the stranger who impersonated the one man Kylo had been desperate to know his entire life. “My grandfather was Darth Vader! He destroyed the Jedi Order! He only cared about power and revenge! He wanted to bring peace and order in the galaxy! He was killed during a weak moment of sentiment! You’re wrong! You’re wrong about all of it!” Anakin chuckled as he fell back into the sand, nearly falling off the crest of the dune. Kylo looked over the edge to see a pit in the sand below him containing a fearsome-looking creature with a beak and tentacles. When he realized how close he had been to falling prey to its trap, he stumbled away.

“What the hell is that thing?”

“A Sarlacc,” Anakin said in amusement. “I wouldn’t go down there if I were you; that thing will digest you over a thousand years…and you will be alive for all of it.”

“The way I died doesn’t seem so bad in comparison,” Kylo mumbled to himself as he searched the barren landscape for shelter away from this man. No, not just “this man.” His grandfather. It couldn’t be true, yet everything in the Force told him it was. “I’m sitting in the middle of the desert talking to the ghost of my grandfather, and he’s actually talking back, but he’s pretending he isn’t the monster whose shadow I grew up under. Ask me in a few hundred years which one is worse.”

“You’re still taking this better than my son,” the young apparition of his grandfather laughed. “He jumped.”

Kylo shook his head. His former master had told him the story. “He refused to join you, so you pushed him.”

“No, I cut off his arm, asked him to join me and then he jumped,” Anakin said. “And, yes, I destroyed the Jedi Order, and I cared about power and revenge, and I wanted to bring peace and order to the galaxy. That is all true. But that moment, when I had to choose between Luke or Sidious, that wasn’t weakness, that was strength. That was who I should have been all along.”

“Liar!”

The glare behind those steely blue eyes was sharp. “Because Sidious told you the truth?”
“I…”

“The truth is, I was born Anakin Skywalker. I lost the woman I loved…and myself. I let the darkness win because Sidious told me things I wanted to hear. He made me feel powerful. He made me think he believed in me when no one else would. I became Darth Vader. Luke saved me; he saw the good in me I refused to see. I turned my back on the dark side; I died Anakin Skywalker. I am Anakin Skywalker. That is the truth.”

The truth. Anakin said it as if it were something simple to accept. It was like knowing the color of the sky. It was like being told, from early childhood, that the color of the sky was “red.” Family, friends, mentors, all confirmed that the color was “red.” If someone came along one day and insisted the color was “blue,” the truth of it didn’t undo all the years of being told otherwise. Kylo might have had the assurance of the Force, but it didn’t make the acceptance any easier. “Even if I believe that everything I know about you is a lie, that doesn’t change what I am.”

The intensity in his grandfather’s eyes softened. “Because Sidious told you who you are?”

“He was right about me.”

“No, he was wrong,” Anakin asserted, stepping closer with an intimidating presence that still embodied Vader. Kylo may have been more physically imposing, but he didn’t feel it in the face of his grandfather’s powerful energy. “He was wrong about me,” he continued, softer. “He was wrong about you. He was wrong about your family—”

“No, he was right about them, too.” Panic was seizing control of him again, tensing his muscles, quickening his respiration, and heightening the intensity of his energy. He would rather burn in the fires of Chaos than face what his grandfather was asking him to face.

“Your family loves you, Ben,” Anakin said like a dagger to a heart. “They always loved you.”

“No, they pretended to love me!” Tears blurred his vision, but he willed them away. He wouldn’t show weakness, not in front of this man.

Anakin kept pushing, as if that weakness was exactly what he was searching for. “Your father loves you. He searched the galaxy for you. He knew what could happen if he went out on that skywalk, but he loved you enough to try to bring you home. Why do you think he forgave you for what you did?”
“No, he… he… he did it for my mother.”

Anakin raised his eyebrows in challenge. “Ah, your mother. She loves you too. After all of the people she loved that you had a hand in murdering, her first words to you after not seeing you in over a decade were ‘my Ben… you have always been everything to me. I forgive you.’ She came back for you, to show you that you didn’t need to stay with the First Order. She told you she believed in you. That sounds like love to me.”

“No,” Kylo stammered, shaking his head vehemently. He could feel himself losing control over his emotions in the Force. He refused to admit that everything he believed he knew was a lie. “She knew I joined the First Order, and she chose to command the very organization that intended to kill me. I don’t care what she said. If she ever wanted to save me, it was for the sake of the Resistance.”

“Is that what you tell yourself?” Anakin scoffed. His eyes were knowing; he sensed him unraveling. Part of Kylo knew that his mother had told him the truth and that he was holding onto his denial because it hurt less to believe that they didn’t love him. But he would never agree with what his grandfather said next. “What about my son—your uncle—he loves you.”

“He tried to kill me!”

“Did he?” Anakin asked in a way that made Kylo doubt what he had seen with his own eyes. “He still loves you, just as you still love him. He allowed you to confront him without adding his death to the list of ghosts in your nightmares.”

“Stop!” The first tears fell, and Kylo hastily wiped them away on his shoulder. “You have no idea what that night did to me.”

“Fair enough,” Anakin held his hands up in surrender. “What about Rey? She loves you.”

Kylo turned and fought the growing despair as his eyes scanned the desolate landscape. “I told you, Rey hates me.”

“Because she told you she wanted to shut out your bond forever? And you believed her?” he asked, not unkindly.
“Why wouldn’t I? She will never forgive me for what I’ve done.”

“Life isn’t black and white, Ben. ‘Never’ or ‘always’ isn’t real. Only the Sith deal in absolutes,” his grandfather said, stepping closer still.

Kylo hummed non-committally in response.

“You said you would destroy her,” Anakin reminded him. “Should she believe you?” The question was enough to motivate him to turn and face his grandfather.

“It was the truth at the time. I was…angry.”

Anakin didn’t respond immediately, choosing instead to level Kylo with a knowing glare, eyebrows raised, turning his palm upward to emphasize his point. “Do you regret it?”

Kylo chewed on his lip, remembering all that he had done in his life that he had come to lament in death. It was too late; he couldn’t change the past. Maz had told him he could learn it, but he was dead. There was nothing he could do anymore. “I’ve done unforgivable things.”

“Do you regret them?”

*Why does it matter*?! His mind screamed.

Kylo knew his grandfather would persist until he answered truthfully or his emotions exploded into the Force, whichever happened first. He figured the odds were about even. “Which part? Keeping secrets from her? Being the Supreme Leader of the First Order? Killing my father?”

“All of it.”

Kylo was quiet as his explosive emotions faded. When he was dead, the fear was less enduring, the anger was a little less blinding, the other choices he could have made a little clearer. None of it mattered now. Nothing could change what he had done, and saying meaningless words about regret
and remorse when it was too late to atone for it seemed hollow. What would it resolve if he admitted that he chose the wrong path? For what purpose—to save his soul? Was that why he was in this place? Did the Force bring him to Anakin so he could assuage the guilt of creating a family line that ended with a monster? Was his mission to save his only grandson from eternal damnation? Either way, Kylo didn’t want any part of it. He didn’t want to be saved. Not now, not when it was too late. He would suffer whatever punishment the Force had in store for him.

He turned to tell Anakin as much, but his grandfather spoke first. “They have forgiven you. People fail each other; the Skywalkers are spectacular at it, but that is what makes us human. We all listen to the darkness, and we have to pay for those choices. Maybe their choices led to your fall, or maybe that responsibility lies with you, but it is your choice what happens now. You chose to leave. If there is no one left to forgive you but yourself, then what is stopping you?”

“It’s not that easy!”

“No, but choosing denial is a lie,” Anakin growled through his teeth and, for the first time, Kylo sensed true anger bristling just under the surface. Good. If this was the man everyone compared him to his entire life, he wanted to see it. “If you don’t want to believe me that your family loves you, that Rey loves you, then hold on to that denial. You don’t need them to know that you are not what Sidious said you were. You are good, they all believe that. I believe that. But do you believe that?”

“No.”

Anakin’s eyes flashed with something fierce, almost… protective, as he grabbed his arm. “Tell me, if you’re a monster, why did you save her? Why did you commit treason? Why did you help the Resistance? Why did you take in the droid? Why did you spare her friends’ lives? Why do you want to destroy Force Destiny? If you’re a monster, why do you fight to keep Rey from the darkness?”

“Enough!” Kylo shouted, ripping his arm away.

“You’re holding onto ghosts, Ben!” Anakin shouted back.


His grandfather sighed in frustration. “Ghosts don’t have to be people who’ve died. You hold onto
the ghost of the person you thought someone was, because the person they are disappointed you. You hold onto what you wanted them to be. Let go of the ghosts. Only then can you find acceptance. And eventually, forgiveness.”

“Oh, I know everything I need to know about them.” They both knew the derisive sarcasm was a comfort in the face of vulnerability. Kylo didn’t care.

“When will you admit the truth?” Anakin sighed. “Don’t let the doubt cloud your mind. We both know what you realized when you were meditating. Rey was guilty of the same sins as your family, yet you forgave her. You made your excuses for that over and over, but when you saw your mother again, you knew you had forgiven them too. I felt it. Why won’t you admit to yourself?”

“The truth? Isn’t it a little late for that? Why are you doing this now? Why didn’t you tell me who you were when you still had a chance? Why did you let Snoke or Sidious or whatever you call him be the only voice in my head? You’re my grandfather! How could you…” his voice broke as the tormenting memories washed over him. “How could you watch what he did to me and do nothing? Why didn’t you talk to me once in all those years when I begged you to answer me? It’s too late… for all of it!” He turned away from the other man and stormed across the sand, determined to exist for the rest of eternity as far away from any elder Skywalker as possible.

“Ben, stop.”

“No.”

“I said, ‘stop!’”

Kylo turned, a tempest of fury. His arm was outstretched, his hand clenched menacingly. The Force responded, wrapping around Anakin’s throat, tightening under his manipulation. “Do you have any idea—”

Anakin ripped the Force away from his throat with ease. “Stop it, Ben, I’m not afraid of you!” With a twitch of his hand, Kylo’s entire body was paralyzed, the Force pressing on his own throat, but not constricting. “Do you think this power over others makes you strong, Ben? Did it make me strong? Did it make your master strong?” Kylo fought against the invisible tethers that held him captive. No matter the amount of Force he drew into his body, he couldn’t break free. The more he struggled, the tighter the hold, which only served to exhaust him. He gave one last furious effort until he was too weak to move. He wondered absently what would happen if he lost consciousness in the afterlife. Kylo abandoned the fight and allowed the Force to fully support his weight. As the seconds passed, Anakin began to struggle to maintain his hold over him. Kylo
waited patiently until his grandfather had no option but to release him.

Kylo dropped to the sand in a huff before slowly pulling himself to his feet and dusting off his robes. He stared down his grandfather in irritation but didn’t react again.

“If darkness was strength, then it wouldn’t be so easy to use,” Anakin said. “I can make you stand here, I can make you bow at my feet, but don’t mistake that for respect or trust. Don’t mistake that for power. A truly powerful leader does not demand loyalty, he inspires it. The power we have, the responsibility we have, is not intended to bend others to our will. It took me too long to understand that. And you don’t need the Force to be strong. You defeated your ‘master’ with that mind of yours, not your power in the Force. Your mother and grandmother didn’t need the Force to get the galaxy to listen. You have something your uncle and I never had. You’re smart, Ben; you have the power of words and ideas, and that is farther-reaching than brute force ever could be. It wasn’t your power that led that young woman to fall in love with you.”

Kylo looked away from his grandfather, out at the horizon…to the rising suns. The deep indigo in the sky was brightening to a vibrant red, the light of the twin suns glowing across the sands. It should have lifted his spirit that he wouldn’t spend eternity in darkness. “I shouldn’t have been born with the Force.”

“You didn’t have someone to teach you the truth when it mattered. I failed you…”

Kylo chuckled darkly. “Don’t be too hard on yourself; it’s a common theme in our family.”

“Just shut up and listen for once,” Anakin snapped. It was enough to draw Kylo’s stare back to his grandfather. “I was there. I was there for all of it. Did my master tell you about the World Between Worlds?”

“Only that he saw a vision there.”

“It’s the closest any mortal will come to the Cosmic Force,” Anakin explained. His tone was wary with the significance of his words. “There is an entrance portal in the physical world and one in the afterlife. Once inside, you have access to the past, present, and future through other portals. They were only flashes, short windows in time created by the Cosmic Force. My master tried to find it in life, to gain absolute power over the future. The portal to the physical world was destroyed on Lothal, but not the portal to the afterlife.”
“Even from the afterlife in the Force, we can’t see the future. I thought I destroyed Sidious for good when I threw him down the reactor shaft, but he found one in death. When I discovered it, I tried to find my own way in. I knew, because of my betrayal, he wanted to destroy all remaining Skywalkers. It was my destiny to defeat him and protect my children…and you. I had failed my family before; it became my mission to stop him. The only problem was, I was limited by death. I was desperate, so I found him and made him believe I killed him in a moment of weakness.

“My master wanted to use the World Between Worlds to travel back in time, to stop his own death and kill my son. He chose to be tempted by visions of the future first. When he traveled to the portals of the past, his plans were complicated when he found that the timeline was fixed. Well, the timeline was fixed for him. Once you see the future, there are no other possibilities. And nothing in the past can be changed to alter that future. He couldn’t kill Luke. So he focused on the future to find a way to defeat him. He saw a flash of the confrontation at the temple; he believed you would kill your uncle. He believed you were the answer before you were even born.

“Then he found evidence in the future of plans he had never created. Not yet, anyway. That was when he learned about the Contingency. After finding evidence of it in the future, he went back to the past to give the Contingency plans to the others who would fulfill it for him. The Contingency was not something he thought of before his death, but something he enacted after from the World Between Worlds by traveling back into the past with the benefit of foresight. He didn’t change anything, because it was always something he was predestined to do. He created his future Empire by laying the groundwork in the past. But I didn’t know any of this until it was too late.

“I couldn’t find the portal, so I tried to protect you while also gaining his trust. I saw how he focused on you—the last of my bloodline—but I thought he intended to kill you. I tried my best in death to ‘accidentally’ interfere when he led you to danger. I tried to talk to you when you were little, to warn you away from him, but it only upset you more to hear from me. You hated the voices, so I thought I would step back and protect you from afar. You hated him. I never thought you would join him. Because of my master, the darkness set in early. By the time I realized how much you needed to hear from me, your darkness wouldn’t allow me in. All I could do was watch and listen and wish you knew the truth.

“Through his future foresight, my master found a humanoid in the Unknown Regions that was inventing a machine. I’m sure you could guess the name. He gave the creature—Snoke—the knowledge of life and death he learned from Darth Plagueis. With that knowledge, Snoke finished Force Destiny. My master was planning his reincarnation, and I saw my chance. As long as he existed in the World Between Worlds, I couldn’t defeat him. But once he was mortal again….

“I followed him to the portal, discovering its location, and then I waited. I knew I only had one chance. If I failed, then he would win. Brendol Hux arrived according to the Contingency plans and killed Snoke through the machine. Sidious incarnated Snoke, and while he was in that machine, I went to the portal. Unfortunately, he had foreseen that as well. Because he could move along the timeline with ease, a past version of him was already there to stop me. I was able to jump
through the portal, but I knew I had little time.

“I stumbled into the wrong portal and found a girl strapped to a machine. I didn’t know what to do, and I didn’t have time, so I took her with me. The Cosmic Force showed me my own portals. It was already too late. I saw your fall more than twenty years before it happened. I knew what would happen to you—what did happen—but I couldn’t stop it; I couldn’t defeat my master, but something happened he didn’t see. When I was distracted with trying to prevent your inevitable fall, the girl entered a portal. She found you, after one of your nightmares manipulated by Sidious. It did something; she changed the dream.

“I knew what I had to do. I brought the girl back to her world, away from the program that would have killed her. Her parents found that she had escaped and panicked. I saw what would happen—what they would do, what she would do to them—but it was the only way to save her. I had been there too long. I had only one chance to do one thing to save you.

“So in your dreams, I brought you to her. I connected you with the girl in the World Between Worlds. It bonded you. Your bond stretched over space and time. Sidious was so focused on this family and your fall, that he didn’t see what I did. In death, I couldn’t save you, but I had hope she could. My master cast me out of the World Between Worlds, and then all I could do was watch what he did to you from afar and hope what I did was enough.

“I knew your fall was inevitable. So while my master focused on you, I hid her powers from him. My master became suspicious of what I had done. The World Between Worlds is a dangerous place. Everything you change has unintended consequences. He knew I had interfered with something, so he tried to kill all other powerful Force-users. The death of those Jedi…it was my fault. I caused him to create the program that I had originally saved her from. But because of what I did, she found you, Ben. She created that bond. And even when she forgot it, you remembered. Nothing could destroy that bond, so all I could do was hope that one day the Force would guide you together again. It did. And now we’re here, at the last portal I saw before my master cast me out.”

Kylo, who had listened intently to his grandfather’s story until then, was finally able to find his voice under the heavy consequence of his words. “So you don’t know how this ends?”

Anakin shook his head.

Kylo paced as he tried to reacquaint himself with the truth. “But you saw everything else before this?”
“Flashes of significant moments, yes.”

Kylo stopped, considered the implications, nodded, then continued pacing. “So you and Rey did this—the bond?”

“Yes, our master was only responsible for reconnecting it,” Anakin replied, studying him closely.

Memories of everything that had happened since his childhood crashed through his mind like an endless nightmare—pain, manipulation, suffering, loneliness, misery, torment, and torture. The younger Skywalker stopped to meet his grandfather’s stare. “You knew what he would do to me.”

Anakin nodded once.

“Yes.”

With the memories came the unheeded pleas—the faces—of the dead. Kylo resumed pacing. “You knew what I would do?”

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you just let him kill me?” he whispered.

Kylo saw the sorrow and regret in his grandfather’s eyes, but it was too late for that. “Because that wasn’t your destiny.”

“I’m sick and tired of hearing about my destiny!” Kylo shouted to the heavens. “I don’t want to be what Sidious or Luke or my parents or you or the Force wants me to be! If I wasn’t dead, I’d show you all what I think of the destiny you sentenced me to!” Waves of emotion cashed over him as he gasped to steady his breath. When he spoke again, the anger had faded. “I would do things none of you could imagine. I would prove you all wrong, I would change the galaxy.”

His tone had been sharp and resentful, but his grandfather smiled. When Anakin spoke, it sounded almost…hopeful. “What would you do if you weren’t dead? Would you ask Rey to leave her friends and flee to the Unknown Regions like you planned when you left the Finalizer? She would
go with you; you would find peace. You would have everything you’ve ever wanted…. But the First Order would win the war. Our master would return. The Dark Army would burn down the entire galaxy looking for you. That would be your legacy. Is that what you want?”

“It doesn’t matter because I am dead.”

There was something clandestine in Anakin’s eyes. “There is no death—”

“Right, only the Force.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Kylo felt a chill as the twin suns burst higher over the horizon. Kylo looked around the barren world, then to his grandfather, then down to himself. It was the first and most logical assumption he’d made after waking up in that place. He was dead, wasn’t he?

“Am I not dead, grandfather?” Anakin didn’t answer directly. Instead, he shrugged, glanced over Kylo’s shoulder and smirked. “Ask him.”

Kylo could feel the change of energy around him. “Who?

Anakin remained evasive and nodded behind him. It wasn’t the growing mirth in the man’s eyes that made Kylo pause, but the familiarity in the energy. His heart skipped a beat as he remembered the last time he had felt that energy. Holding his breath to steel himself, he turned.

The man looked exactly as Kylo remembered him; young, scruffy, and eyes bright with wit. He lost sight of him as his vision blurred with unshed tears. Releasing a shuddering breath, he whispered. “Dad?”

“Hey, son.”

Before he realized what he was doing, Kylo was walking toward his father. When Kylo reached him, he collapsed into his father as if he were a boy again. He was surprised when his father wrapped his arms around him, holding him with a desperation that mirrored his own. Kylo allowed the tears to fall onto the familiar jacket as he released all the pain he had been struggling to suppress since he had forever destroyed both of their lives. “I’m sorry!” he sobbed. “I’m so sorry!”
“Me too, son,” his father whispered, tightening his grip on him, “and I wish we had more time.” The words crashed over him like cold water. His head slowly lifted from Han’s shoulder to meet his eyes. “It’s time to go,” his father said.

“Where are we going?” he asked shakily as he wiped away tears. He was surprisingly unbothered that his father saw him at his most vulnerable. “To the afterlife? Am I dead?”

“Not yet, kid.”

“If I’m not dead, then what am I supposed to do?” He looked to his father, who was staring behind him. Kylo turned to the meaningful stare of his grandfather. “Do what you said you would do: prove them wrong, change the galaxy,” he said. “Finish what I started, but never got to finish, Ben. You left it all behind. You are stronger than me. You can bring balance to the Force.” He nodded once to Han and stepped back. “My mom, Shmi, said that the biggest problem in the universe is that no one helps each other. You can help them.”

There was something knowing in the man’s eyes, an insight beyond just hope. “You did see the future,” Kylo realized. “didn’t you?”

Anakin lowered his eyes to the sand and grinned. “A possibility.”

Kylo had heard the future described like that once before, a long time ago at a Jedi temple. There was no reason beyond that to prove his new understanding, but he knew it with everything in him. Anakin hadn’t seen that variant of the future on his own; someone else had shown him. “Dev,” he said. “It was Dev.”

Anakin responded by lifting his shoulders in a slight shrug.

“Is he…” Kylo swallowed past the guilt tightening in his throat. “Is he here?”

“He’s somewhere,” his grandfather said, raising his stare to meet Kylo’s, “Doing whatever he can from this side of the Force.”

There was something about the way Anakin had said those words, as if it had been Dev’s only mission for some time, as if he had given up everything… The realization churned in Kylo’s stomach. “When did he ‘see’ this possibility of the future?”
By the look of sympathy in Anakin’s eyes, it was clear they both knew when Dev had seen it. Was that why he stepped between Kylo and Cade? Was it why he wouldn’t allow Ben Solo to heal him? Had Dev given his life for this future? Anakin shook his head, but Kylo felt the truth in his fears.

“That isn’t your burden to bear, Ben.”

“But Dev—”

“It was the price he paid,” Anakin said sharply, refusing to allow Kylo to spiral into dark thoughts. “If you want to honor him, then ensure the future he died to protect.”

Kylo glanced from his grandfather to his father. “I’m going back?” Both men nodded. There was an exhilaration that shivered up his spine with the understanding he would see Rey again. He could protect her from the evil he helped create, he could apologize for what he had broken between them, he could tell her…he could tell her what he never thought he’d have the chance again to say. He could save her. If Dev died to protect this future, then it was a future worth protecting. He turned to Anakin. “Can we do it, grandfather? Can we win?”

Something passed over Anakin’s smile, dimming it. “For a price.”

Kylo was not new to this; everything in his life had come with a significant price to be paid. And surety of this future had already come with a price. What could cost more than losing his brother? The Force guided him to the answer his grandfather wouldn’t say. Ben nodded. If it realized a future Dev died for, a future Anakin believed in, then he was willing to pay it.

“Time to go, kid,” his father said behind him. Kylo wanted to fight for this future more than anything, but it hurt to leave his family after finally getting them back. He wrapped his father in another tight embrace. “I love you, Dad.”

“I know,” his father said in typical Han fashion, but then he added, “I love you, too, Ben. More than you know.”

“I can still bring you back,” Kylo said through tears. “I can use Force Destiny.” His dad nodded and smiled wanly, and something in his eyes made him fear his father didn’t believe him. Did he know something Kylo didn’t? Or did he fear Kylo would never have the chance? He remembered the visions. Would his rebellion against destiny still lead him to a predetermined fate? Was this what he had meant to do all along? Was that the purpose of this place?
Han grasped him by the shoulders and winked. Something suddenly jerked him backward and out of his father’s arms. Sand swirled around him as he fell, obscuring his vision, but he couldn’t find his voice to scream. Kylo felt himself hit the ground, and he gasped for air.

“Ben!” his father shouted.

“Ben?”

The voice had changed somehow, but it was hard to decide who it belonged to; his mind felt heavy and clouded. “Ben?”
Chapter End Notes

Discussions of death
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Caedus threw Rey forward into the snow. "Go to him," he commanded. She stood hesitantly and walked toward Kylo, swallowing the uncertainty brought forth by Jaina's words. What if she woke him and he wanted Jaina instead? She grasped on tightly to the hope flickering through her dark thoughts. *Why would he save you if none of it was real? You know him, in the bond, better than anyone.* Her eyes were fixed on her bondmate, though she was aware of every Knight’s movement over her shoulder. As she knelt beside him, a familiar energy caressed her senses. *Ben.* The comfort of his presence in the Force stole her breath away. *I am so selfish.* She found relief in sensing his awakening, knowing the suffering it would cause.

As his energy grew stronger, she could feel his pain radiate through the bond. “Ben?” Her body shook in anticipation, hoping that he wouldn't wake for his own sake, but yearning to hear his voice again. She could feel his heart beating rapidly and erratically, the vile poison had already corrupted his system and seized control. He gasped again, and his chest arched as it dug its toxic claws in deeper. Rey could feel it burn as if it was invading her own lungs.

“Ben?”

*Maybe the dose will be so strong that it will take your mind far, far away from this nightmare.*

His energy was uneven as she felt him reach out into the Force, fighting against the black prison that provided him with just enough awareness for him to recognize his captivity in its deadly grasp. His eyes fluttered open.

“Rey?” He winced in pain as she collapsed upon his chest at the sound of his voice. His body was shaking underneath her. She was uncertain if it was because of the cold or the toxic substances coursing through his veins, until she heard him sob, “I never thought I'd see you again.” The pain in his voice broke her heart, knowing what they had done to him, but hearing it again left her with a sole determination; she *would* save him. She didn’t care to consider if it was a purely selfish endeavor, she wouldn’t give up on him.

*You can survive this. You have to. We’ll get you help.*

“Me, too,” she said, sitting up to tenderly brush his hair from his face with her shackled hands, smiling through her tears. He was in agony, but his eyes were brimming with something warm and gentle. There was so much she needed to tell him, but all she could think when staring into those eyes was, *I love you.* The rest of the galaxy faded away as the comfort of the bond surrounded them. For a fleeting moment in time between breaths, everything was perfect again. Then she was
suddenly and violently ripped from his arms.

"Ben!"

"That's enough of that," Caedus growled, "It's time for Kylo Ren to pay for his crimes against the First Order. You decide, Jedi... a quick, relatively painless death by the lightsaber he wielded to commit his treasonous crimes...or a slow death of extensive suffering worthy of the severity of betraying his title and everything we stand for."

"No!" She knew struggling was useless, even with the Force she was drastically outnumbered, but she couldn't allow them to take him from her. If she died fighting to save him, then so be it. She loved him and he wouldn't have been there if it weren't for her. Channeling her anger, she barreled into the Knight. Caedus was knocked onto his back, his lightsaber sliding away through the icy snow. Rey scrambled for it, her fingers wrapping around its hilt when a boot stomped down on her hand. The lightsaber snapped up to Jaina’s hand, who stared down at her with a wicked smile.

"Fine. I'll let him choose," Caedus said, his voice emotionless behind the modulator, but she knew he was irritated by the clench of his fists. "Dorsk. Shut her up.” Another pair of boots came into view and she was pulled into a kneeling position against her will. She was overcome with the same paralysis she had felt that day on Takodana. She tried to resist it, but her connection to the Force was too weak against his power.

She watched Kylo try to stand, but his legs gave out underneath him. He collapsed to his knees, his breathing labored and uneven, his eyes burning in hatred. Caedus knelt in front of him, staring at him for a moment before slipping his gloved fingers behind his helmet for the release. He hesitantly removed the helmet as the mechanics hissed, placing it in the snow beside him.

"Kylo," he acknowledged.

"Jacen," Kylo replied.

“That is not my name!” he spat. “I am master of the Knights now. I am Caedus Ren. Jacen is dead.”

No, it can’t be him. This disgusting creature can’t be Jacen. He had so much light!
“I called you all here,” Kylo rasped. “To stand by my side, to protect me from mutiny. You were supposed to fight with me, not against me! You were my brothers. Especially you, Jacen. After everything we’ve been through, you’d turn on me?”

Every word dripped with betrayal as he spoke through clenched teeth, his entire body shaking as he tried to muster the strength to stand. “Corran? Kyp? Dorsk? Rayf? Jaina? Is it your intention to betray me? All of you?”

“You betrayed us... for that.” Jacen gestured to Rey.

Rey watched Kylo assess the situation in one blink and change tactic in the next. "Let her go. You have no dispute with her; she means nothing to this war. I am the one you want. I will go quietly if you just let her and her friends go.”

Jacen tilted his head as he watched him intently. “She’s nothing to this war, but who is she to you?”

Kylo didn’t even look at her. “Nothing.” It was not the first time he had admitted that. Only this time, even after everything Jaina had said, she didn’t believe it. She knew Jacen didn’t, either.

"Ah...” he turned to Rey and winked as a tightness grew behind her ribs. “I believe you, but alas, we are here for her, not you, Kylo. The Supreme Leader has ordered her capture for crimes committed against the First Order. She killed our wise and powerful leader. You have no bargaining chip here,” he explained while fixing his glove, as though he were stating something of no consequence. “And, besides, it’s not like we can’t replace you.”

"No! What Hux told you was wrong… it wasn’t her. I lied; she had nothing to do with it. I killed Snoke while he was distracted with her...I did it for his throne. For power. Let her go, and I will accept the punishment for my crimes against the First Order." Rey could hear the desperation in his voice. His eyes were pleading with the other Knight.

No, Ben, don't do this. They will kill you!

"You will die. And so will she,” the Knight said with an impassive sigh.

"No!” Kylo shouted, slamming his fist into the snow. He panted from the exertion. The poison was
quickly weakening him; Rey knew neither of them were in the position to fight back. The only
difference was, the cause for his weakness was slowly killing him. She was running out of time.

"Look how far you've fallen," Jacen mused. Through the bond, Rey saw flashes of an old man
standing in a burning village. She wondered its significance to him them, in that moment.

Kylo chuckled bitterly. "Something far worse has happened to you. Your allegiance now lies with
the power of the First Order rather than the brotherhood of the Knights. You would betray your
own—"

"No!" Jacen shouted, "You betrayed everything we stand for by committing high treason...for
her! With her! Snoke was a wise and powerful leader."

"Hux manipulated you…"

"No." Jacen clenched his fists in anger, trying to maintain control. "He showed me the security
holos of the throne room when you used the one and only Luke Skywalker's lightsaber against
Snoke. The one man who ruined everything! The man who trained Cade, who killed Dev! The man
you have sought to destroy for years! And you did it to save her. A Jedi. His apprentice. What kind
of power does she hold over you? The Kylo Ren I fought with would have taken his own life
before betraying everything he believed in. I want you to think about that, as the spice in your
blood slowly steals your life. Or, if you have any honor left, you will do what needs to be done.
You are a disgrace."

He laid Kylo's lightsaber between them. His eyes dared the former Knight to attempt to use it
against him, to give him any reason to strike down the man he once respected. Kylo made no move
to take the weapon. Jacen stood.

"So you choose cowardice, then. Fine. I'm taking your girlfriend back to the new Supreme Leader.
She will be the first experiment with Force Destiny. Hopefully, it will be a much quicker death for
her than what you are about to experience. Or…maybe I should keep her around a little longer."

Jacen turned to Rey. Under her paralysis in the Force, she couldn’t stop him from pulling her to a
stand, grabbing her shackled hand and sliding it down the heat of his body. As he forced her hand
lower, he leaned forward and licked a wet stripe up her neck. It instantly cooled in the chilly night
air, a tingling reminder of his depravity branded on her skin.
“Don’t you touch her!” Kylo’s eyes were wild and deranged. Instead of summoning and activating his weapon, he stood in a hurricane of rage, lightning blasting from his fingertips. Jacen crumpled to the ground before Rey as the lightning jolted through his body. The lightning assault stopped abruptly as Kylo collapsed to his knees in exhaustion. The distraction was enough for Dorsk to ease his hold, and Rey’s leg shot out to kick Jacen in the face as hard as she could. Dorsk quickly immobilized her with the Force again, but Rey smirked, glaring at Jacen’s cold, emotionless eyes as he gasped for breath, blood trickling from a wound above his brow.

“Well, that’s new.” Jacen smiled, popping up as if nothing had happened. Kylo hadn’t accepted defeat yet. Jacen’s eyes brightened as his throat constricted, holding Kylo’s burning stare. Small choking sounds were the only proof that Kylo’s clenched fingers had the desired effect.

“No!” Jaina screamed, pushing a wall of Force at Kylo. Jacen laughed hoarsely as Kylo crashed backward into the snow, releasing him from his grasp. He stood to tower over Kylo’s prone form.

"Oh, how the tables have turned.” The cruel smile slowly faded from Jacen’s face. “I was never quite strong enough to best you in training. You would always win Snoke’s favor. He sent us away to do his bidding while he kept you around as his little pet.”

“I would have rather been on the other side of the galaxy from him, trust me.” There was something dark and haunted about Kylo’s tone that made Rey wonder again exactly what becoming the creature’s pet entailed.

For a split-second, a knowing shadow fell over Jacen’s face before the wicked smile returned. “All the training you faced was deserved; you should have been stronger, more worthy, you should have obeyed. Or you shouldn’t have sworn loyalty in the first place, because you’re clearly loyal to no one. Snoke was a powerful leader, but he was too blinded by your Skywalker blood that he couldn’t see you for what we all saw…weakness. You may have killed him and taken his throne, but you are no Supreme Leader. You failed like you always do. And now you are as weak as we always knew you were,” his lighthearted chuckling continued, "It's a shame you won’t get to suffer because of your weakness as long as we were forced to suffer it. I would have enjoyed you watching her die...but I'll settle for her watching you instead."

He kicked Kylo in the chest as he tried to stand, sprawling him backward again in the snow. Kylo rolled to his side, wheezing for breath. He braced himself to stand again, but his arms collapsed under his weight. Rey could feel the consuming pain spread through his body. The binders weakened her connection to the Force around her, but somehow, not to him. She tried to reach out to him through their bond.

Ben, don’t give up. We can still find a way to save you. Promise me you'll stay with me... please. Kylo looked up at her with longing and remorse in his eyes.
Don’t worry about me. Anything coming to me is something I deserve. We both know it's too late for me. But I do promise I won't give up until you're safe. Not even death can stop me from making sure you survive the consequences of my failures. But, Rey, the Resistance is in danger. They didn't destroy all the clones. Hux has one as his puppet Supreme Leader, he looks…

Like you. I know, Ben. I killed him.

Kylo’s eyebrow raised slightly. There was something that softened in his eyes, only for a moment, before his attention shifted back to the other Knight.

"Let her go, Jace, or you'll pay with your life," he warned between heavy pants, his voice weak with exhaustion. The other Knight just laughed dryly in amusement.

“What will you do? Try to choke me again? Let me return the favor.” He lifted his arm toward Kylo, commanding the Force to tighten around his windpipe. Even in his weakness, Kylo held his stare, refusing to struggle or grasp at his throat. The defiance in his eyes reminded her of his memory of torture by the Supreme Leader. Jacen knelt in the snow before his old friend, cocking his head, studying him. He gestured with his free hand, and Dorsk forced Rey to her knees beside him.

“Stare into his eyes, girl. Watch the life drain from them. There is nothing more vulnerable in the galaxy than a man in the moment before his death. It is the greatest intimacy you will ever experience. You will know exactly who that man is.” Rey could do nothing but watch as Kylo weakened. His eyes flashed to hers, defiance fading to sorrow and regret. They glazed as his oxygen-deprived mind drifted from consciousness.

“No!”

Suddenly, a bright light lit up the night. The Knight holding Rey, Dorsk, fell away from her, instantly lifting the paralysis that had controlled her. Rey realized it was a blaster bolt as another plasma beam shot past Jacen. A roar echoed through the darkness.

Chewie!

"Kill that Wookiee!" Jacen shouted, stepping around Kylo and engaging his lightsaber. Jacen stood
above him as he held the blade to his throat. "Put the weapon down, or I kill your best friend’s son!" he ordered. Rey could almost feel the burning heat of the plasma blade on her own skin. Teeth bared, she sprinted at Jacen, knowing he could likely turn the weapon on her. With her wrists in binders, she was utterly defenseless, but that wouldn’t stop her.

Kylo must have come to the same conclusion. “No, Rey!” His voice was panicked as he reached out to her, his manipulation of the Force enveloping her, immediately halting her pursuit. Flashes of a fatal confrontation in the rain by a burning temple drifted through her mind. She wasn’t certain if it was her memory or his.

“Drop… the…weapon… Wookiee.” Jacen’s voice sounded crazed as he stared down Chewbacca. Kylo tilted his head as the blade drew closer to his throat, no doubt leaving burns from the heat. After a tense moment, the Wookiee cried out in surrender and lowered his weapon. Jacen slowly lowered the blade from Kylo’s neck as Chewbacca complied. Silence fell upon the night as the tension around them became tangible. Jacen and Chewbacca never broke eye contact. Everything was silent. Too silent. Rey gasped as a bright red blade burst from the Wookie's abdomen. It was quickly withdrawn, and Rayf stepped out from behind him.

"No!” Rey screamed as Chewbacca howled in agony. She heard Rose and Finn cry out from somewhere in the darkness. Her mind transported her back to the similar night that she watched Kylo's blade pierce through Han Solo; she felt the same agony and hopelessness. The father had fallen in the belief that his son could be saved. It had seemed impossible then, but he had left the First Order, he had been on his way to her. For one split second, she thought it would be all right. But then he was shot down and nearly died saving her. He was only alive because the Knights had turned on him and injected him with poison. Now the Knights had her and her friends, and Chewie, who had attempted to rescue them all, had been driven through with a lightsaber like his best friend, Han. They had both received their injuries trying to save the man who was lying somewhere in the darkness, slowly running out of time. It seemed more hopeless than Han’s last moment on Starkiller.

"He put his weapon down!” she screamed at Jacen. Chewbacca grabbed the Knight who had wounded him. He forcefully threw him into the side of the Millennium Falcon, growling as he challenged the other Knights.

Kyp approached Jacen. “Caedus, what do we do? There could be others out here. We are exposed and blind to attack.”

Jacen lifted his lightsaber back to Kylo’s throat. "Fall back to the ship. I’ll finish Kylo Ren.”

“Wait!” Rey pleaded in desperation. “I made my choice. Leave him to die. Then I’ll go willingly”
Jacen withdrew the blade and shrugged, “Fine. He deserves to suffer.” With that, he pulled her to him with the Force. As Kylo stared up at them helplessly, Jacen slid his glove down the side of her face, grasping her chin. Under the paralysis he held her under, she could not struggle against his touch. He pulled her to him, pressing his lips roughly over hers. He moaned obscenely, pressing himself against her. She shut her eyes, ashamed to look down at her bondmate. A tear fell from her eye, and Jacen pulled away to catch it with a gloved finger, bringing it to his mouth to taste, a move he had likely learned from the creature that had been their former master.

*I’m sorry, Ben.*

“While you lie here suffering in your weakness, I want you to think about everything I will do to her before I kill her,” Jacen whispered to the man he once would have died to protect.

“I may die here,” Kylo said through gritted teeth, his eyes dark with bloodlust, “but she will kill you. That’s a promise.” Rey opened her eyes to meet bondmate’s steady gaze, finding nothing but pride and warmth there. Her lips parted to tell him how much he meant to her, but then she felt a spike in the Force. Jacen’s hand was outstretched as a wave of Force crashed into Kylo’s chest. He flew backward, landing violently in the snow.

“Ben!” she screamed, but his body was limp. Jacen released his hold over her, and she immediately punched him in the throat with her shackled hands. She took off running into the waning snowfall, but he was on her in a few steps. He tackled her to the ground, then wrapped his arm around her, jerking her to her feet. She fought against him as he dragged her across the snow.

"Stop it!” Jacen commanded, fighting to maintain control over her. She wouldn’t make it easy for him, kicking, screaming, and twisting in his arms. He grunted as her shackled fists connected with his face. He wrapped his arm around her chest, pinning her arms, and lifted her off the ground.

"Ben!” She could no longer see him in the dark. She didn’t know if he survived what Jacen had done to him. “Ben!” The shouting around her faded. All she could hear was the crashing of her racing heart in her ears. She tried to connect to the Force, but the energy around her was just out of reach, no matter what she did. She kicked her legs out, trying to escape from his grasp. She felt a sharp pain at the back of her head and instantly fell into the darkness.
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Several characters are choked, kicked, and shocked with lightning

Violence

A character is impaled on a lightsaber

Sexual violence

Rey is groped and kissed non-consentually

Threat of death

Kylo's life is threatened in several violent ways
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished (except the editing of the second half of part 2) so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Ben!”

Kylo opened his eyes, blinking away snowflakes from his eyelashes. When had he fallen asleep? He was surrounded by cold. As he sat up weakly, examining the frozen landscape, he was reminded why he was there.
"Ben!" Rey screamed again from somewhere in the darkness. He forced himself up from the ground to go after her. He stood, and his knees immediately gave out. He pushed himself back up but stumbled forward, collapsing again in the snow. Forcing himself up, again and again, he attempted to reach Rey as engines rumbled over the snow. He became weaker with each effort, until he could no longer push himself up.

It's useless. He rolled over and stared up at the heavens. The Upsilon class command ship, his command ship, flew off into the night. His eyes followed it to a fantastic firefight in the sky. He was impressed. The Resistance had created a force to be reckoned with.

They will do nothing against those deflector shields.

He knew he had to get up there, to Rey, but his body protested with every attempt he made. The world spun turbulently around him. Each shallow breath was not quite deep enough to satisfy the demand from his lungs for more oxygen, surrendering him to the torment of perpetually straddling the border of consciousness. Attempts to focus and lower his heart rate were ineffective; whatever was spreading inside him was beyond his control. The scene around him was blurry and the sound distorted, muffled. His head felt heavy, his muscles weak. The only benefit of this toxin spreading through his body was that he could barely feel the pain of his injuries. His connection to Rey was still intact. He struggled against the shackles of the toxin that fettered his efforts, but the weakness was unyielding. His unsuccessful exertions were futile.

I have to get to her. She needs help, but I'm too weak... I can't do it. This poison will kill me before I find the strength to save her. It's hopeless.

He reached for his lightsaber, and it found its way to his hand from somewhere in the darkness. He activated it. He admired the unstable crimson blade. It was him. He burned with the same unstable fire within him. He was fractured, always conflicted like the crystal inside. And he left a path of destruction in his wake.

I was the Supreme Leader of the First Order and the master of the Knights of Ren, arguably the most powerful man in the galaxy, and I still couldn't save her. He contemplated the Force and the only power that remained. Perhaps the dream was the Force’s way to show him how it had to end. There is only one way I can be strong enough to save her. If I can not save her in life, then I will help her through death.

He lowered the base of the blade and the right lateral vent to his own throat. Closing his eyes, he allowed his final resolution to bathe him in warmth. His breathing was uneven as he felt the intense heat of the vent prickle against his skin. His hands trembled in anticipation. He thought only of her
and the beautiful sound of her voice.

I’m sorry, Rey. I failed. He braced himself and held his breath.

"The Ben I know wouldn't have given up so easily," a haunting voice said, breaking his concentration. His eyes shot open. A brilliant blue light radiated from his peripheral vision. He instinctively flipped the lightsaber toward the voice, burning the side of his neck with the vent. The lightsaber sliced through the apparition and hit the snow with velocity.


"Still trying to kill me, I see.”

"Still impervious to my attempts..." Kylo replied.

Luke looked much as he did when Kylo confronted him on Crait, as he did when Kylo last saw him before he burned down the temple. “You look terrible, kid.”

“Well, you’re dead, so I think I fared better.” He deactivated the lightsaber, rubbing his neck where he had burned himself.

"You were about to make that much worse," Luke observed with an air of humor. “But if you do, you’ll seal their fates.”

Kylo sighed, laying his head back into the numbing snow. “I can’t help her like this.”

“No, I think for the first time, you can,” Luke replied. When Kylo closed his eyes to ignore him, he added antagonistically. “Or you can do what you’ve always done and run away.”

In his anger, Kylo pushed himself up to a stand. “That’s what you do!” he shouted at his uncle, who stood stoically before him. His body swayed, and he took three sideways steps, but he collapsed back to the snow despite his efforts. Couldn't Luke see? He was too weak. "I have to save her. As you are proving right now, death would only make me stronger."
It is the only option I have left.

Luke’s expression softened as he knelt next to him. "She needs Ben alive."

"Ben is already gone," Kylo replied bitterly. “You made sure of that.”

“I failed you,” Luke repeated his words from Crait as if they would mean anything to Kylo. “I’m sorry. I don’t ask for your forgiveness, I know you would never ask me for mine. But I still love you, kid. You are still my nephew. You are still Ben. No one is ever really gone.”

“I was never really Ben in the first place,” he murmured. “That name belongs to someone else. A legend.”

Luke’s gaze shifted from Kylo to the sky above them as the battle continued. “Do you know what your name means—to us?"

“I was named after Ben Kenobi,” he said, working his jaw, “as some homage to your dead master who was killed by the man you all hate—my grandfather.”

Not a flicker of emotion passed over Luke’s face, and Kylo remembered why he shut down around his uncle. He was always too emotional, and Luke was enviously and irritatingly calm. “Did I ever tell you the story of where my journey to becoming a Jedi began?” Kylo shook his head. “Artoo escaped from a captured ship carrying your mother. She recorded a hologram for Artoo to give to Obi-wan Kenobi on Tatooine. I found the droid and offered to help him. I thought my old family friend, Ben Kenobi, might know him. In truth, that wasn’t his real name, but that was how I knew him. He had been in hiding, watching over me my entire life. He was Obi-wan Kenobi.

“He had been your grandfather’s closest friend, like a brother. I didn’t appreciate him when he was alive. I didn’t understand what he was trying to teach me. All I knew was he lied to me about who my father was. He told me Darth Vader killed my father. He just wanted to protect me, and, in the end, he did. He sacrificed himself in a fight with my father so your mother, your father, and I could escape. In her most desperate hour, your mother had reached out to Ben. I will always remember the last words of her recording; she told him that he was her ‘only hope.’ It was her message to him that brought us all together. Everything he did set in motion the fall of the Empire. To your mother…and your father…and me, your name means hope. You have always been your family’s hope, Ben, and now you just might be the galaxy’s too.
Kylo laughed mirthlessly. “No, Luke, the only way I can help the galaxy is if I am not in it anymore. That hope you’re looking for? That’s Rey.”


“Hardly.”

Luke ignored his petulant retort. “Do you know where she got her name?”

Kylo sighed. “I don’t know, her doll?”

“You don’t remember?” There was something in his uncle’s eyes that told him he did remember, or at least, should have. The Force inside him begged him to remember the little girl in his dreams.

“Those memories, almost all of them, were taken from me. I don’t remember,” he said, though the Force was bristled and sharp when he spoke, the way it was when he lied.

“Not this,” Luke pressed, refusing to allow Kylo to shut down this time. “This you’ve locked away, but it’s there. You remember, don’t you? Who named her Rey?”

You know the truth. Say it. Say it!

The old memory, torn to shreds, played in bits in pieces, but it was enough. He remembered. His voice was barely a whisper when he spoke. “We did – Rey and I.”

“Why?”

Kylo lay back in the snow, a secret smile on his lips. “I told my father about her once. I tried to describe her. I said her eyes were like sunshine, like a ray of light. That’s what she was to me—what she still is, a ‘Rey of light.’ She told me she couldn’t remember her name, so that’s what I called her. I wrote it for her once, with my new calligraphy pen. I was so young, so I misspelled it. I tried to crumple up the paper to throw it away, but she wouldn’t let me. She told me she loved it
and decided that would be her name. Just like that.” Why had he locked that memory away? What other memories had he allowed Sidious to take from him? Why had he allowed himself to all but forget her? It had always only ever been her.

It was the first time since that night that Kylo had trusted Luke enough to let him out of his sight. Lying in the bone-numbing snow, he watched the battle above his head and didn’t fear what Luke would do to him. When Luke spoke, when he entered his vision again, his body didn’t respond in visceral fear. “Tell me, what does your mother say is like the sun?”

Kylo answered automatically. “Hope.”

“Both you and Rey, bonded, equals, named in hope, are the only two people standing between the First Order and the galaxy. Do you think that was by chance? Do you not see your joint fate, right in front of you? If you can just stop denying the truth, I know you have the strength in you to do this.”

“Ah, now you have hope for me? When there’s no one else left to have hope in?” Kylo snorted derisively. “Luke, the legend who wouldn’t give up on Darth Vader, saw so much darkness in his own nephew that he believed his only option was to kill him in his sleep.”

"That’s not true, Ben,” Luke said firmly, and for the first time, Kylo saw emotions burning in his eyes. “I saw what Sidious wanted me to see—the death and destruction of everyone I loved. It was a fleeting moment of fear, weakness, almost instinct. I had no intention to kill you, but my darkness had irreversible consequences. You reacted, and I never had a chance to explain. I caused everything that I had feared to become a reality. I’ve had to live with that, but there was one question I thought I would never get an answer to: why didn’t you tell me?”

It was all too much for Kylo to process. He didn’t want to believe his uncle, but he saw the truth in his eyes. He had never intended to kill him. It changed everything. The part that ate away at his resolve to hate his uncle, however, was that was the question that had haunted his uncle; not why did he kill the others, not why did he join the First Order, but why had he not shared about the whisper he had struggled with. “I was ashamed of my darkness. My parents had already abandoned me. You were my last hope to not become the monster everyone compared me to. I was afraid of what you would think of me if you knew.”

Luke’s eyes softened, and for the first time, Kylo felt as if he was not talking to Luke Skywalker, Jedi Master, but his uncle. “You know why they sent you to me, don’t you? They never wanted you to be a Jedi, but they both knew you were special, that you deserved to reach the full potential of your powers. They didn’t fear you, Ben; they feared what would become of you if they ignored that important side of you. They didn’t see darkness; they saw a boy struggling to figure out who he was. They thought if you didn’t learn from me, then you would learn from someone like
Snoke…or who he really was. They loved you so much that they let you go.”

His hand found Kylo’s shoulder, and he suppressed a shudder. “But it was the hardest thing they ever did. They didn’t abandon you, Ben; your mother wrote letters, your father left holomessages—I kept them until you finished your training, so you wouldn’t lose your focus. If you don’t believe me, I took them with me to Ahch-To; they could still be there. I didn’t know you were suffering. It seemed like you would become the most powerful Jedi this galaxy has ever seen…until you found out about your grandfather. In my hubris, I believed I had done enough to keep you from the dark. I’ve struggled with darkness, too. I wouldn’t have seen you as a monster. If I had known how you truly felt….”

“But you did think I was a monster,” Kylo said, and the tears welling in his eyes were evident in his voice. “Even if you didn’t plan to kill me, you saw my darkness, and the first thing you did was grab your weapon.”

Luke’s own eyes began to glisten. “My thoughts were so focused on the future, on the horizon, that I wasn’t there with you. If I had just stopped, begged for the truth, stayed in that moment with you, recognized the gift it could have been…maybe we could have stopped him. But I…failed the galaxy. I failed Leia. And Han. The worst part, the part I couldn’t bear, was that I not only failed you as a Master, but as your uncle,” Luke smiled somberly. “But I can’t change what I did. Nothing I say will take it back. What happens next is up to you. You can lie here and die, angry at something you cannot change. Or you can let go. Let go of the anger and resentment that holds you prisoner. Let go of the past and what you were, and find the strength you didn't know you have. I never stopped looking to the horizon, but you never stopped looking behind you.”

Kylo closed his eyes as the snow numbed him. "Luke Skywalker, master of cryptic words. It would be comical that even death didn't change you, but you are just a hallucination of my dying mind."

"I'm no hallucination, Ben,” Luke said, “I told you I would always be with you, even in death."

Kylo didn’t know if it had been Luke’s intention, but his words set fire to the anger simmering in his chest, trembling with fury that required a target. "Then why weren't you there when I needed you!" he shouted, his voice wavering. “When I was fighting my darkness! When I didn’t know how to leave! When Rey was dying! You were never there for me!"

"I couldn’t come to you in the Force until you opened yourself to the light. You had shut me out, and so had she. I heard your pleas when Rey was dying, Ben, but I couldn’t help you. It was important for you to do it on your own. You didn’t need me. You didn’t need Han or Leia. You didn’t need Snoke or the Knights of Ren or the First Order or your grandfather. You didn’t need anyone. No one else was in your head but you. You found that strength, that light, and you saved her on your own. You can find that strength within yourself again.”
Kylo turned away, the anger giving way to tears that prickled at the corner of his eyes. With stubborn determination, Luke continued to chip away at the walls Kylo had built around himself. “Your entire life, we were worried about you having too much of your grandfather in you, and Sidious was worried about you having too much of your father in you. Rey was right: we never gave Ben a chance. Ben is sometimes more light, and sometimes more dark. You accepted that in Rey and are a far better teacher than I could ever have been for her. And Rey saw in you what I had been too blind in my hubris to see. If I had just accepted that in you sooner, then maybe you could have accepted it in yourself.

“The mighty, even royal, Skywalker bloodline was supposed to bring balance to the Force. Anakin failed. I failed. But there is still a chance for you, Ben. You are the last scion of the Skywalker bloodline, but it could be that Solo heart of yours that brings balance to the galaxy.

“I failed you Ben, but it’s not too late. I failed you when I did not take Sidious seriously enough, when I trained you to be something you were not, and when I thought for one fateful moment that killing you would save us all. When in reality, the only hope for the galaxy rested in the hands of you and a fierce girl from Jakku the entire time.

“I should have listened. When your father spoke about you as a baby, he said you had ‘ancient eyes’. He said it was like you had been ‘waiting around millennia to show up at this exact moment in history’. I think he was right. The Cosmic Force has brought you to this moment. You and Rey can bring balance to the Force. You can end this. Together.”

Kylo sighed. It wasn’t the first time Luke had expected impossible things from him. "How? I can barely stand. How can I take on the entire First Order like this?"

"Let go. Trust in yourself. Let go of what you think Kylo Ren should do, what your parents would do, what Sidious would do, what your grandfather would do, and just let go. Don’t suppress your perceived weakness, use it. Stop fighting what is out of your control. The Ben I know would not let repeated failure stop him. He’d find a way." Kylo pushed himself to a seated position. He gave Luke a sideways glance and sighed. He closed his eyes and found the Force. He tried to draw in the energy he so desperately needed. The connection was too weak for him to manipulate anything, the suppressing effects of the toxin were too strong. He pushed into it, willing it, fighting for the energy he knew was surrounding him. With whatever this was in his system, he simply could not do it. He let go of the connection to the Force and opened his eyes. Luke was gone.

*Had he ever really been here at all?*

"You're wrong, Luke!" he yelled into the dark emptiness, throwing his lightsaber in frustration.
"I'm not strong enough. I've never been strong enough...." Anger shot to his throat. His rage increased the effects of the poison on his senses, and he was overwhelmed as he grasped desperately to maintain control. He was exhausted from battling against the heavy blanket of altered perception and awareness.

I'm tired of fighting. I don't want to fight anymore.

He closed his eyes and fell back into the cold snow, which burned against his heated body. He let go. He stopped fighting the toxin and let the feeling consume him. A euphoric warmth enveloped him. He let go of everything physical around him and floated in the peaceful feeling.

If this is how I die, at least it is not the worst way to go.

A tingling sensation shivered through his body...then numbness. The heat of his anger and the cold of the snow on his back faded away until he felt nothing at all. He felt as if his body was suspended in air like he had completely lost contact with the physical world.

Is this what death feels like?

He was no longer a caged beast ensnared in the toxin's grasp. It had become his entire existence. The only sensation was the fire inside him, the desire to destroy it all. He struggled to his feet and realized he could stand. The effects of the toxin gave him artificial strength or suppressed his weakness; he wasn’t sure which. He summoned his lightsaber, but he no longer sensed a connection to it. He shuddered.

My connection to the Force...is gone. The implication terrified him; he had lost the powers he relied so deeply upon. He could function when he released himself to the toxin, but it came at the cost of losing the physical connections to the world around him, including his connection to the Force.

I might as well be blind. All of my training. Everything I have worked for. Everything that made me...me...is missing. He felt lost. It was like asking a man to immediately function without one of his senses. How am I supposed to save her without the Force? I am nothing without the Force.

He was sure that, had he been under normal mental capacities, he would panic and probably throw something heavy. Instead, he sighed and reached down to pick up the lightsaber by hand. I have to destroy the First Order...and the Knights of Ren...and Sidious if I'm too late...without the Force...At
least I can walk now, I guess.

He trudged through the snow to the Millennium Falcon. It was the ship that took his father away from him so often as a child, leaving him with lies and broken promises. It was the ship his father taught him to pilot. It was the ship he spent hours teaching himself alone at night in the cockpit, all to make his father proud. It was the ship his father wanted him to one day inherit, so Kylo could become a pilot like him. It was the ship where he disappointed his father, time and time again, because he was not like him, no matter how hard he tried to be. And it was the ship that took Rey away from him time and time again, just as it had his father.

He sighed, his head spinning from whatever was coursing through his veins. He stepped on board, and stepped back into his childhood. He immediately remembered the smell of the old thing. It smelled like his father. It was older, dirtier than he remembered... it was falling apart, as if his father's death was crumbling the Falcon the same way it was slowly destroying him. His footsteps echoed through the corridor in time with the heartbeat pounding in his ears. He let his fingers run along the old dents he accidentally made in the ship when he was young and inexperienced with his control of the Force. He slowly walked past his favorite hiding spot when he would play with Chewbacca. His hand slid over the dejark table, which he was always forbidden to touch. There were so many memories there.

He couldn't find his tunic, which had been removed at some point in the attempt to save him. He searched for where his father kept his spare clothes. The ship had changed hands so many times, he didn't bother with the closets. Han rarely used them anyway. He knew that his father had hidden clothes in the compartments, and when Han had his ship back, he would have taken his possessions out of storage to lay claim to them again.

As he opened one drawer, he found instead a row of books. Luke's texts. He found the book he had been searching for and hesitated as he looked at the page he had desperately needed in the cavern. He knew if Rey found it, she could use it to save him. He made his decision and quickly put the book away.

He found the drawer he had been looking for. The thought struck him that the last time it was opened, his father was alive. It could have been that day. He closed his eyes to keep the emotions at bay. He pushed the thought to the back of his mind and rummaged through the trunk until he found something that looked like it would fit...and something that wasn't white.

As he turned to put it on, he saw the devastation of the toxin in the mirror. His entire upper torso was covered in a network of black vessels under his skin. Whatever this was had already begun snaking up toward his neck, and had almost reached his hands.

He knew he was running out of time, but he hesitated to find the emotional strength to put on his
On his way, he heard thumping sounds and shrill beeps. Opening a compartment, he sighed in relief. “Blue!” he said, “How did you get in here?” Blue spoke so quickly that Kylo could only catch parts of his whirlwind explanation. The droid told a story of being thrown from the fighter, finding Kylo unconscious, then following the Knights back to the Millennium Falcon, where he hid in fear. He knelt next to the droid, checking him for damage, relieved to find him cold to the touch but otherwise unharmed. “Come on, Blue, let’s go finish this,” he said, wiping the snow off the best he could. He stood and led the droid from the compartment to the cockpit.

It was older and neglected, but still just as he remembered it. He made his way to the pilot’s chair. He had dreamt of that moment as a child, wondering what it would be like to sit in his father’s chair. It was more humbling than he had ever anticipated. He slid down into the chair, hesitant to touch even the armrests. It felt much smaller than he remembered it when he would sit on his father’s lap. He could almost feel the man’s energy in the Force as he ran his fingers over the controls, re-familiarizing himself with something he hadn’t seen in what felt like a lifetime. Sitting in his father’s chair was more terrifying than sitting on his master’s throne. I don’t deserve to sit here. He flipped the systems on, remembering the steps by heart. He preferred the controls in his TIE Silencer, this old thing was a piece of junk, after all, but it was the only place that had ever felt like home. He smiled.

He startled in his seat when Chewbacca roared behind him and smacked him upside the head with a strength Kylo wasn’t prepared for. He braced himself for more but was surprised when he felt the Wookiee's big paw on his hair, ruffling it with a familiarity Kylo had all but forgotten. Chewbacca whined, his tone gentle.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm glad to be back here too, Chewie," Kylo admitted. "I'm glad you're here with me; I need a co-pilot." The Wookiee handed him a comlink. It was only then that Kylo noticed his breathing seemed irregular and pained. Why didn't the Knights take him prisoner? The Wookiee collapsed roughly into the chair next to him, and immediately started on preparing the ship for flight.

"Ready?" he asked Chewbacca nervously. The Wookiee whined back. Kylo sighed, "Yeah, I have a bad feeling, too."
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Brief thoughts of suicide

Injury

Kylo is struggling with the effects of spice
Hux's Plan

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Rey awoke to find her arms and legs bound to a machine, and the panic immediately set in. The machine was made of some sort of metallic substance, and it seemed to be electrified as it created a loud buzzing hum. She was shackled to the center platform, her feet immersed in a dark, viscous liquid. There were two circular metal arms lined with Kyber crystals that crossed in front of her. She had seen this machine before, though not from this point of view. It was the Force Destiny. She pulled desperately at the shackles binding her to the center platform, when a voice cut through the silence behind her.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Where am I?" she called out, half to the voice, half to herself. She tried to reach out into the Force to find Kylo. All she could feel was the overwhelming Force energy of the crystals.

The red headed man circled in front of her. "You are onboard my ship, the Finalizer. You are attached to a machine called Force Destiny,"

“Hux.”

"Ah, I see my reputation precedes me," he smiled, "It is Supreme Leader Hux now, thanks to you killing Ren’s clone."

The events of Ilum came back to her with full force. She was prisoner of the First Order. Where were her friends? The poison. Where was Kylo? Was this it? Was she the only one left against the soon-to-be reincarnated Sidious and his Dark Army? “You won’t be Supreme Leader for long if you bring back Snoke,” she reminded him.

Hux chuckled dryly. “Oh, I have no intention of bringing back that creature.”

If he doesn’t want to bring back Sidious, then what does he want?
The confusion on her face only served to extend his discomforting laughter. "I should actually thank you for whatever spell you put Ren under to break his allegiance to Snoke," he continued, "With Snoke in power, I would have never had a chance to recognize my true calling as a leader. He was too powerful. Then he brought in Ren and gave him free reign within my military. Without that Force power that they possessed, I was incapable of matching their strength as leaders. I deserved to be more than general. I wanted the control and domination they had over the rest of the First Order, including me. And now...you and your Jedi powers will give it to me. I will be the most powerful Supreme Leader that ever lived."

She stared at him, fear trickling down her spine as she understood his plan. "Me? Why me?"

"Because I saw the way both Snoke and Ren were terrified of your raw power," he sneered. "I knew I had to have it, and all the pieces practically fell into place for me. Snoke is dead, and he left behind the blueprints for the design of this little machine for me. Ren is dead, because he was stupid enough to commit treason for you. With Ren out of the way, which I must admit was disappointingly easy, then the Knights of Ren are no longer of use to me. I will have them dispatched as soon as I crush the rest of your little Resistance, which is happening as we speak. All that remains is you. It was ingenious, really. We have spent so many years developing the crystals into instruments of destruction, when the real power was in the life force they can absorb and transfer."

“You’re a monster!”

Hux adjusted his glove and continued as if she had said nothing. “This machine will kill you—don’t fear, it’s through electrocution so it will be very painful—and the Kyber crystals will absorb your life force. Then I will reverse the reactor and that life force will be transferred... to me. With your Force power, and no other Force users left, I will become unstoppable. The galaxy will be mine.”
Chapter End Notes

Threats of violence

Hux threatens violence against Rey
Ben Solo

Chapter Notes

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The Resistance fighters were no longer on the offensive. They had retreated to defend the allied cruiser and freighters, which were taking heavy fire from the Finalizer. Poe rolled the fighter to avoid another missile from the two TIE fighters tailing him.

He was exhausted. There were just too many of them. The morale of the Resistance was dwindling with their numbers. He had brought the last of the galaxy’s defenses to the grasp First Order. It was supposed to be a surprise attack. They were supposed to catch them unawares. But instead of crumbling under the loss of their leader, the First Order promptly initiated a counterattack. Since then, they had systematically and effectively decimated the remnants of the Resistance.

He focused his sights on a fighter that was targeting one of their X-Wings. Before he could get off a shot, the Tie Fighter in front of him exploded, followed by the two fighters tailing him. A light freighter dove past him, taking out several more TIE fighters. Then it targeted two of the Hutt’s largest cruisers by flying sideways in between the two vessels. The pilot was a mad-man, and the triggerman was one of best shot he had ever seen. The ship maneuvered with agility around the explosive destruction of TIE fighters it left in its wake, as it targeted the other two main Hutt cruisers.

There were cheers from the other pilots over the comms. There was a renewed life to the fight around them as morale soared. Whoever this mysterious team was, he was grateful they showed up when they did. The momentum of the battle was changing, and Poe could feel hope returning like the sunrise after a long, dark night.

The freighter pivoted and rolled, drawing several fighters with it as it rocketed off toward the Finalizer. He followed, intrigued, easily eliminating the fighters that gave chase. The freighter aimed for several turrets near the bow of the ship. It was obvious there was a strategy behind the destruction.

He heard…laughing over the comms, and that’s when it clicked.

“Is that…the Millennium Falcon?” he whispered to the inside of his cockpit.

“Hello?” a voice rasped over the comlink he had given Finn. He pulled it out of his jacket and nearly dropped it in his urgency.
“Hello?” He responded back. He didn’t recognize the voice.

“Uh...is this the Resistance?”

“Yes...” he answered slowly. “Isn’t this?”

“No,” the voice replied, “But I can help you.”

Poe followed the freighter as it dipped under the destroyer. Curiously, it wasn’t targeting weapons turrets. It had nothing to do with the weapons systems at all. He had no idea what they were shooting at, but it certainly wasn’t indiscriminate, if the swarm of TIEs had anything to do with it. Whoever this was, they had intimate knowledge of First Order ships. “Cone tower, fifteen degrees northwest, two hundred and fifty meters,” he heard distantly over the comlink. The freighter rolled to the left, and, seconds later, a cone-like structure was destroyed.

Poe destroyed three TIEs that were following the freighter as he tried to work out what was happening and who he was speaking to. “Is this...is this Millennium Falcon?”

“One and only,” he heard the voice chuckle softly. “What is your plan here?

“It’s a coordinated effort with allied forces across the galaxy. We’re taking the entire fleet down at one time,” he answered, though he realized he had no idea who he was communicating with.

“I need to talk to the general...Dameron.”

“Poe Dameron here.” His mind still attempted to connect the voice to the Millennium Falcon. This voice was a man’s, but it wasn’t Finn. The voice was familiar, but only Rey, Finn, Rose, and the Wookiee left on that freighter, and according to intel, they had all been captured. Was it a defected Stormtrooper?

“You can’t do enough damage with their deflector shields up,” the man said, “Just trust me, and pull your cruisers back, out of the distance of their ion cannons. I can get on that destroyer. Rey and the others were taken prisoner by the Knights of Ren under orders of Armitage Hux. He is using clones as a decoys, but it’s all Hux. I’m going to rescue Rey and lower their deflector shields. I can
take their entire weapons and defense systems offline...for the entire fleet if I can take both bridges. I will contact you once the bridges have fallen. Just buy me some time."

"Who the hell is this?" Poe demanded. He stared at the comlink in his hand, his brow furrowed at the absurdity of the conversation.

Inside the cockpit of the Millennium Falcon, Kylo stared nervously at the comlink in his hand.

Uh, this should go well.

“Chewie, get up here!” he yelled down to the dorsal turret. He maneuvered the Falcon to the bow of the Finalizer. He positioned the freighter in the path of the tractor beam projector and released the controls as it locked on to the ship.

I’m coming, Rey.

He breathed anxiously as he was slowly drawn onboard his former star destroyer.

Let’s go do what I do best...destroy.

After a moment, the Wookiee stumbled into the cockpit and collapsed into the co-pilot’s chair. His breathing was ragged. Kylo eyed him carefully, but he showed no indication of injury.

“This reminds me of a crazy, half thought-out plan my father would come up with.” Kylo sighed. Chewbacca whimpered in agreement.

“I hope you’re right, Chewie.”

“Hello? Are you there?” Poe asked over the comlink. “If I am going to put the entire Resistance on the line, I need to at least know who this is.”

“He wants to know my name,” he whispered. The Wookiee smacked him upside the head with a growl.
“Of course, I didn’t forget!” he barked. The Wookiee groaned in rebuttal, shrugging his shoulders. He leaned his head back in the seat and closed his eyes.

Why is this so difficult? All he wants is a name!

But he knew the words he chose next were far more than a name. He opened his eyes with a huff, when a glint of gold caught his attention. He reached up, carefully wrapping his finger around the chain, stunned to feel them solid in his hand. He rolled the dice in his fingertips wistfully, a small smile breaking the tension in his face as the memories flooded back to him. An idea surfaced in his mind as he stared at the dice—a means to realize the vow he made to his father. It decreased the odds stacked against them…not that his father had ever cared for the odds anyway.

The Wookiee's whine broke him of his reverie. He closed his fist around the dice protectively and placed them in a pocket on his belt. He knew the answer; he had known it for longer than he cared to admit. Side-eying Chewbacca, he swallowed thickly and lifted the comlink.

"This is Ben Solo."
THE REST OF PART 2 WILL BE POSTED ASAP (BEFORE TROS IS RELEASED.)

THE AMAZING AND TALENTED MEAXWALK IS WORKING DILIGENTLY TO BETA THE REMAINING CHAPTERS TO HELP GET THIS THING OUT IN TIME. ALL THE KUDOS TO HER. THANK YOU FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY HEART FOR YOUR HELP. I MIGHT POST THEM AS SHE GETS THEM BACK TO ME, SERIOUSLY SHE DESERVES SO MUCH KUDOS FOR POWERING THROUGH ALL THESE CHAPTERS, OR I MIGHT WAIT TO POST THEM IN LARGE CHUNKS LIKE I HAVE BEEN DOING. I WANT TO GET THIS OUT BEFORE THE 20TH WHEN I GO SEE TROS, SO I'LL POST ANY REMAINING UNEDITED CHAPTERS THE NIGHT BEFORE IF WE DON'T GET TO THEM IN TIME.
I WOULD ALSO LIKE TO THANK THE READERS WHO HAVE LEFT SUCH INSPIRING COMMENTS. THANK YOU FOR READING AND TAKING THE TIME TO MAKE ME SMILE. YOUR COMMENTS MEAN MORE TO ME THAN YOU'LL EVER KNOW.

I'VE BEEN WORKING ON THIS THING FOR ALMOST TWO YEARS, I FINISHED WRITING IN AUGUST, AND TAKEN WAAAAY TO LOONG FOR EDITING. (SERIOUSLY, I HATE IT). IN TYPICAL EDEN STYLE, IT IS DOWN TO THE LAST MINUTE. LESS THAN TWO WEEKS TO GO!
Chapter Notes

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Rey searched her surroundings for a means of escape. Hux was busy pushing buttons at the control panel, his back toward her. There was an open pit below her with some sort of machine built into the walls. Her arms were in binders over her head, and her feet were in binders attached to the pool of liquid at her feet. Even if she pushed her feet as far as the binders would allow, she couldn’t reach the large Kyber on the platform. The circular steel arms weren’t moving, but she couldn’t reach them or their attached Kyber crystals with her hands. She couldn’t twist, she couldn’t squeeze out the restraints; she was trapped.

She screamed in anger, fighting the binders with all her strength. They didn’t budge. Fear tightened in her chest, causing her to pant. It wasn’t death she feared. In all likelihood, they were all dead. But she couldn’t give up and allow the red-headed man to take her Force powers. It was easier to understand now why her bondmate had stayed; the thought of the galaxy in this man’s hands was terrifying.

"The Force isn’t a power I possess," she said, breaking the silence. "You won’t suddenly be able to Force choke your underlings just because you stole my life."

Hux didn’t immediately respond; he was distracted by following the steps from the hologram in his hand, whistling in amusement. "We'll see about that," he replied, unclipping her new lightsaber from his belt and igniting it. The man was clearly unpracticed with the weapon. As he ineptly spun the lightsaber in his hand—apparently no one had explained to him the importance of rolling the wrists in lightsaber combat—she hoped he accidentally cut off his own arm. "If you're right, at least I'll have this to demand order."

Rey rolled her eyes, attempting to draw him into a confrontation. If he just released her from the binders…. “The Force is so much more than a lightsaber.”

Hux laughed and turned back to the controls. “Oh, really? How powerful are you without it?”

"Take the binders off, and I'll show you," Rey challenged. She tried desperately to access the Force, or the bond, but she could feel nothing. She was running out of time.
"Even if I cannot wield the power," Hux explained as he pushed more buttons, "with your death, I will have destroyed all the Force-users. Control of the First Order and the galaxy will still be mine. If my father could see how much power I have now...."

"I'm sure your father is already so proud of the sadistic mass-murderer you have become," she mumbled.

Hux turned to her with a smile. "Well, I killed him, so...."

"Is there some initiation rule in the First Order that you have to kill your family to join or...." Rey had said it flippantly, but she watched him closely as he tensed. Talking about his family was wearing down his restraint. This could be her chance.

*Family it is.*

“Did you kill your mother, too?” Hux’s fists clenched on the controls as he emitted a low sneer. His arms were shaking. She was getting somewhere.

*Oh, that one hit a nerve.*

“I killed both my parents, so I guess I would fit in perfectly here,” she continued. He was breathing heavily as he bent over the waist-high controls, resting his elbows on the panel to steady himself. She had seen her bondmate’s body language long enough to know this man was agitated.

“Instead of taking my powers and trying to learn how to properly use a lightsaber, you should just let me rule and—”

"That's enough!" he shouted, "It's ready."

The extendable walkway retracted from the platform with a mechanical hiss. Hux pulled a lever to start the machine, and it released a low whine. The chamber below her began to spark with electricity, slowly starting to revolve. Rey pulled harder at her restraints, trying desperately to break free. As the chamber rotated methodically, the heavy crystal-lined circular cross bars began to revolve around her platform as well.
The bars moved faster until she could no longer see them. Through them, she could see Hux’s wicked smile as he watched with hands clasped behind his back. A large bubble of energy began forming around her. She could sense the heaviness even through her binders. It was creating a large sphere of Force. Jerking at the binders again, she cried out into the room. She refused to beg for her life; she wouldn’t give Hux the satisfaction. As the chamber spun below her, the electricity started to arc across the chamber. Terror pooled in her stomach. She stared down at the pool of liquid at her feet.
One character speaks of impending torture of another

Discussion of murdering

Characters speak about the murder of family members
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Ben deactivated Blue’s holorecorder, standing as the ship came to rest in the hangar. “All right, we don’t have a lot of time. Once we land, we need to fight our way out of here and get to the Detention Block…” Ben turned to the Wookiee but realized that he was slumped over in the chair.

"Chewie!" he cried. He pulled the large creature, who was barely responsive, onto the floor. "Chewie! Stay with me!"

As Ben moved Chewie, he found a scorched, black hole where fur should have been. No! He found the wound on the other side and traced the tell-tale burns around the wound.

A lightsaber. The Knights... That was why they didn't take him. They left him for dead.

He winced as he ripped the Bacta patch off the side of his forehead.

The Wookiee moaned at him.

"I know," he replied hoarsely as he worked. The wound from his side ached in response to the memory Chewbacca was apologizing for. "I deserved it; I would have shot me, too. And I stopped the brunt of the bolt with the Force. I’m fine. Please don’t apologize."

Ben surveyed the damage done to his old friend and he knew. He knew from years of being the perpetrator behind those wounds. It was fatal.

Chewbacca whimpered weakly.

"Hold on, please," Ben begged him, knowing that it was useless. "I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

The Wookiee whined back at him, bringing his giant paw up to Ben's shoulder, squeezing in a
reassuring way that reminded him of days long gone—games in the *Falcon* while his father worked, days at the lake waiting hours for the Wookiee's fur to dry, growls of encouragement when he practiced the Force on his own. Ben shut his eyes to stem the tears threatening to flow. "Me too, Chewie" he choked.

Chewbacca whined again in reply.

"I promise, I will," his voice broke as his vision blurred. The Wookiee sighed, and his giant paw slid to the floor. Ben waited for Chewbacca's chest to rise one last time, but it never did.

"Goodbye, old friend," he whispered, "tell my father... thank you, and... I'm sorry."

Ben knelt for a moment, reflecting on his childhood, which was nothing but a memory. His mother and father were gone. Luke was gone. Even his childhood playmate Chewbacca was gone. It was everything he had wanted for years, but it didn’t ease the suffering. Destroying the past would have never brought him peace. Even with them all gone, the past was still there, as painful as before. And they were gone, because of him. His only comfort was that, in all likelihood, he would be joining them soon.

There was a soft beeping behind him, and Ben turned to Blue. “He’s dead,” he told him. “I’m sad because I’ll miss him.” The droid cocked its domed head, whistling more questions.

“Yes, like missing Rey, but different.” Anticipating the droid’s next question, he continued, “Different because he can’t come back.”

Ben hoped more than he had ever hoped for anything before that he wouldn’t be too late for Rey. He couldn’t fathom the thought that she would be gone forever, too.

He was jolted out of his thoughts when he heard movement and voices on the ship. Tucking his lightsaber into his boot, he reached for Chewie’s weapon. He would have to fight his way out, but a blaster would do better in close quarters. Ben listened as the voices got closer; there were too many. He knew he couldn't fight his way onto the destroyer, or persuade them to ignore him without the Force.

Even if he was able to make it out of the hanger, in his current attire he wouldn't be able to make it to the detention block without being stopped by someone. He was left with few options and a dwindling amount of time to decide how to get to that Detention block. Then he recalled the
legendary stories of the man without the Force who could talk his way out of anything.

Well, if it worked on the Death Star....

He stared at the droid. The First Order droid. “Blue, I need you to pretend you’re bad!” The droid regarded him silently, and Ben knew Blue must be feeling something close to betrayal. “I need your help, and you can only help me if you’re not a prisoner, too,” he whispered. The droid protested weakly, but they both knew they didn’t have time to hide while the troopers searched the ship. “It’s all pretend, okay?”

The droid cocked his domed head, but beeped in affirmation.

"Ow! I give myself up!” he shouted, kneeling before Blue. “Please, stop! The pilot is dead, I'm throwing my weapon away from me!” He threw the bowcaster down the corridor.

“When they come in here, shock me,” he whispered to the droid.

The stormtroopers cautiously walked around the corner with their weapons raised, and Blue shocked him, sneering in a deep tone that Ben had never heard before. The little droid was convincing. "I surrender to the First Order," he said hoarsely, putting his hands behind his head. “Just don’t let the droid hurt me again.”

“Who brought the droid?” One of the troopers asked the other, as they dragged Ben to his feet. The other shrugged, and that was the last of it as they placed Ben’s wrists in binders and marched him off the ship. He had always hated that he had been fated to be Force-sensitive, but in that daunting moment when an entire destroyer stood between him and Rey, he would have given anything to have it back. He had to escape capture, defeat the First Order, save Rey, take control of the ship, and do it all without the Force. The dice in his pocket rattled together as he walked. "For luck," his father had told him a lifetime ago. Ben hoped they were as lucky as his father suggested; he would need it.

There were several more stormtroopers gathered at the bottom of the ramp. The hangar swarmed with activity. Ben was gambling that the chaos would preserve his anonymity.

“On your knees!” a commanding stormtrooper demanded with her weapon aimed at Ben's chest. He swallowed his irritation at being commanded to do anything by a subordinate.
She's not my subordinate anymore, he reminded himself, slowly dropping to one knee, then the other.

"This is Han Solo's ship," the decorated trooper continued. It was a statement, not a question. "It was on the back of Sabacc cards issued by the Order, I would recognize it anywhere."

"On the back of 'The Idiot' card," another trooper added.

"No, it was on the back of 'The Star' card," the commanding trooper corrected. "Han Solo's face was on the back of 'The Idiot' card; a good choice if you ask me." Anger shot through his veins at their inciting comments. Ben closed his eyes, focusing on his breathing before he did something incredibly foolish.

"No, they changed the deck after Kylo Ren killed Han Solo. Now the back of 'The Idiot' card is – "

"This is Han Solo's ship," Ben ground out, interrupting their argument before he had to hear more rage-provoking judgments of his father. Han Solo hadn't been perfect, but he would not allow anyone else to speak ill of him.

"You're not Han Solo."

Ben rolled his eyes. "Clearly," he scoffed. "He died killing a bunch of you idiots on Starkiller." His vision went white, and he collapsed forward onto his hands. It wasn't until the pain radiated from the back of his head seconds later that he realized he had been struck by the trooper behind him. "Has anyone ever told you guys that you have no sense of humor?" He felt an odd surge of strength as the pain in his head intensified.

"What is your name?"

He grinned, staring into the visor of the nearest trooper. "Would you believe Supreme Leader Kylo Ren?" The butt of a weapon struck him in the side. "Didn't think so," he gasped through a coughing fit.

The commanding trooper's patience had clearly worn thin judging by the clipped tone of her voice. "Your name."
"Ben Solo,” he rasped, suppressing another cough. “My name is Ben Solo.” The trooper stared at him for a moment, or at least it looked like she was staring at him, and fear crawled up the back of his neck. He didn’t have the roguish charm of his father, no matter how much he attempted to channel it. His heart pounded against his rib cage as he waited for them to see right through him.

Does she recognize me now? What would they do?

The stormtrooper turned to the others.

"Take the prisoner to the Detention Block."
Chapter End Notes

Death

Death of a character
Inevitability

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes
The revolving of the machine below her increased in speed until it became a blur to match the crossbars revolving around her. Rey could sense the vibrations of the electricity in the air. The heaviness from the spherical Force field around her made her lightheaded. She thought of Ben.

*Is he asleep? Or is he awake and suffering out there in the snow alone? Is he dead?* She couldn’t decide which reality would be worse.

A massive arc of electricity sparked across the chamber below her.

*If he is dead, I'll be joining him soon enough.*

She screamed as she once again tried in vain to pull her legs free from their restraints. There was no escape, no hope for rescue, no way to fight. She was trapped in a death machine, her life in the hands of a madman. She attempted to find a connection to the Force, but it was still just out of reach.

The heaviness of the spherical ball of Force around felt like a weight on her chest, stealing her breath every time she breathed. Suddenly, arcs of electricity surrounded the machine. Blue arcs branched across the revolving sphere of Force and over the large Kyber crystal and pool of liquid at her feet.

*This is it.*

She closed her eyes and waited for the pain.

It impacted her like a speeder at full velocity. She screamed in pain as the energy burned through her. It was piercing and intense, jolting through every cell of her body. It consumed her thoughts so she could think of nothing else. All she could do was struggle against it and grasp tightly on to her own energy. Pressure mounted in her chest and her lungs quivered as breathing became impossible. She felt like she was being torn apart. The pain overwhelmed her senses and she fell into darkness.
Chapter End Notes

Torture

A major character is tortured
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Ben's wrists itched in the binders; his head was heavy from the toxins. He looked down and noticed the black latticework had spread onto the top of his hand. Blue rolled silently next to them, having followed them without incident. Ben was almost insulted by how terrible First Order security was. It was no wonder that the Resistance had been capable of infiltrating the *Supremacy* with nothing more than a traitorous splicer and a couple stolen uniforms. He walked quietly with the two troopers down the long corridor, studying them both. The first one was taller, more physically intimidating, but leaned away from Ben as they walked. The second, smaller in stature, quite possibly female, held a powerful weapon that he did not want to meet the business end of, if he could help it.

*It'll have to do.*

He was being marched into the dragon's lair with a face someone was bound to recognize. His scar – his “failure” against Rey – was well known gossip at the First Order. Even if most hadn’t seen him without his helmet, that scar would betray him for what he was – what he *had* been. It was the first time since he received the scar down his face that he wished it wasn't there. He eyed the connecting corridors, waiting for the officer that would inevitably complicate his plan. An alarm sounded in a different section of the ship, and several stormtroopers hurried down the corridor in the opposite direction. The droid swiveled his head around to look at him, and he knew what he was suggesting.

*It's now or never.*

The two stormtroopers accompanying Ben were distracted by the alarm. Blue rolled up to one and shocked him in the leg. It was quite possibly the only chance he would have. While the first stormtrooper was turned, Ben tore the gun from his hands and kicked the trooper away from him.

Ben swiftly ducked into an empty interrogation room and pinned himself against the inner wall. With the weapon raised, he waited. As the second trooper rushed through the entry, he shot her with the blaster. Then he waited for the first stormtrooper to walk into the room.

He hit the door control panel with his elbow to shut the door and stepped behind the stormtrooper's back. He quickly brought his binders over the front of his mask, underneath the trooper's throat. There was armor there, but it was better suited to defend against sharp weapons than strangulation. He applied pressure with the binders while he pulled the trooper backward off-balance, leveraging his height to his advantage.

Ben choked the trooper into unconsciousness, listening for other troopers to respond to the sound of the blast. When no one came, Ben released the trooper, dropping him in a heap on the floor. He
pulled his lightsaber from his boot and cut off his binders. Opening the blastdoor, Ben allowed the trembling droid inside. Then he hastily began removing the trooper’s suit.

Chapter End Notes

Death of minor character

Killed by major character
Stormtrooper

Chapter Notes

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"FN 2187." Finn dejectedly raised his head to stare at the stormtrooper and droid who had entered his detention cell. He recognized the droid as the one who had found him on the *Supremacy*. Just his luck, he supposed.

"Finn," he replied quietly.

"Sorry, Finn, old habit," the trooper responded as he threw his blaster to the side and approached him. The stormtrooper pulled a lightsaber from his belt and ignited it. Finn knew intimately who it belonged to, the humming sound dragging his memories back to a snow-covered planet. Those vents were burned into his memory... and nightmares. Finn threw his arms up to protect himself. The trooper used the bright red blade to cut the binders from Finn’s wrists. Finn felt the shackles fall away and studied the stormtrooper in confusion.

"What?" the trooper asked.

Finn stared at him suspiciously. "What are you doing?"

"Well, unless you wanted to stick around for your execution, I was getting you out of here...." the stormtrooper replied slowly.

Finn remained seated, staring at the lightsaber-wielding stormtrooper. "Who are you, and why would you help me? And why do you have Kylo Ren’s lightsaber?"

"Oh..." The trooper took off his helmet, raven hair falling to his shoulders. "I forgot I was still wearing the helmet. This toxin is messing with my head."

"Kylo?"

"Well, Ben...now...again..." Finn stared at him with an odd expression on his face. Ben took a half step back, fearing that he was intimidating the other man. “The shift change is in fifteen minutes, and then we’re getting you out of here.”
Ben was floundering, paralyzed as Finn jumped up and opened his arms to embrace him. When Ben leaned away, Finn slapped him awkwardly on the back instead. "You're okay!"

"Okay, save the galaxy now; uh, hug...later?"

“What is with your family and hugs?” Finn stepped away from him, but the smile did not fade from his face. “Where's Rey? Does she know you're here? She thought...we all thought you were dead.” Ben shook his head, chewing his lip so he wouldn’t burden Finn with the knowledge that he was as good as dead if they didn’t take down the First Order before Ben could make it to a medbay. Instead, Ben moved to the corners of the room and removed caps from the ceiling and their corresponding bases on the floor.

“What are you going to do with a Force cage?” Finn asked, recognizing the device from his time on the ship. Ben didn't answer. If Finn knew his plan, then Rey would know, and Rey would not leave the ship if she knew his plan. Finn shifted uncomfortably on his feet as Ben began methodically removing the stormtrooper armor. Finn’s eyes grew distrustful as he noticed the droid waiting quietly in the corner. “Is that the droid that—”

“Not anymore,” Ben said with a tone that brokered no room for argument.

As Ben pried the armor from his throat, Finn's eyes widened. “What's with your neck?” By the look of horror on Finn’s face, the spread of the toxin had gotten much worse. Ben was running out of time. “Is that the glitter stuff they injected you with?”

"Glitterstim? Ah, it makes sense now. I didn't know they could put the powder in an injector. They must have mixed it with something; it’s not usually black, but telepathy is a side effect. That must be why I could hear Rey, even though I can't access the Force...."

Finn’s eyes were wide. "I'm sorry, I must be hallucinating, because I swear you said you can’t access the Force."

Ben sighed, accepting that he would have to enlighten Finn to more than he had planned. "It’s the toxin. I have to do all of this without the use of the Force." Finn studied him quietly for a moment, the realization of how precarious the situation truly was settling on his concerned features. Ben didn't have to say it. The odds were stacked against him, and if he did not succeed, they would all die.
Finn broke the silence with a clap of his hands. “All right, what's the plan?”

*I like this kid.*

Finn didn't question if Ben had thought the plan through; he wasn't concerned with the risk to his own life. He *trusted* that Ben was on his side and was prepared to fight beside him. Finn may not have been loyal to the First Order, but he was loyal to his friends. Ben knew he could trust him to get Rey off the ship.

"Right, I need you to find Rose. You'll have a five-minute window during shift change to get off the detention block and that's it—so move fast. I need you to shut down all systems on the detention block in the—"

"System control room. But turn off the alarms to the mainframe first, got it."

Ben felt...relieved that he had the former stormtrooper on his side. He found himself both trusting in the man's capabilities and trusting in his loyalty. It was an odd feeling. “Good, that will give me time to get Rey. Meet her by the turbolifts at the Emergency Bridge. She’ll tell you the plan, which will give me time to think of it. When you're done, go to the main hanger. The *Millennium Falcon* is there. Use whatever means necessary to get her off this ship. Then you blow this thing. Do *not* wait for me, understand?” He stared at Finn unwaveringly to get his message across.

Finn was silent for a moment, digesting what Ben wanted from him, what he *didn't* want from him. “Ben, we can stay, we can help you...”

“*You are,*” he assured him, “by getting Rey safely off this ship.”

"*You know Rey—*"

"That is why I said 'whatever means necessary.'* Ben knew Rey would want to stay and fight. That was who she was, and he didn't doubt she would be a tremendous asset in combat. He had seen her fight, had fought beside her, had been on the receiving end of her ferocity, and he knew he may not have enough left to do it all alone. But this fight was an uphill battle; if she stayed, she could die. If she stayed, they could be forced to choose between saving each other or saving the galaxy. He knew she would make the right decision, but could he? Perhaps it was selfish, but if he had to choose, he would choose her life every time. It was his battle to fight, his wrong to right; he had to get her off that ship.
"Why can't you go with us? She wants you with her, Ben. You know she loves you." Ben didn’t think the words would sting as much as they did, but he appreciated the change in Finn. It would be easier for Rey, he decided, if Finn didn't openly hate him.

"I know. But if I don't do this, the Resistance will fail. I will help bring down the First Order, but I have to do it from the inside." Ben dropped his eyes so Finn wouldn't see the conflict raging in them. He was destroying everything he had worked for, and the whispers in his head were screaming that he had failed. “I promised Hux I’d burn it all to the ground, and I keep my promises.”

"How do you expect to do this alone?"

"By taking their defense systems offline, lowering the deflector shields, giving the Resistance enough time to destroy it. All of it." The obstacles he faced to succeed in single-handedly destroying the First Order were infinite in his eyes, but he had fought hopeless battles before, and those times he had always been on his own.

Finn, however, was reluctant to let Ben face the juggernaut of the First Order by himself. "No offense, but you know this ship just as well as I do; you know the fail-safes, the redundancies. Do you have any idea of the odds of...."

"Never tell me the odds." Ben smiled, mostly to himself, his eyes flickering in nostalgia. “Sorry, I’ve always wanted to say that.”

"Okay...” Finn drawled in confusion, “but you're the enemy here now, with no special powers. You think they're going to let you walk in and disable it all?"

“No. I plan to kill Hux and the Knights of Ren, then break into the defense systems on the Command Bridge and Emergency Bridge before they discover I'm here," he replied matter-of-factly.

*And hopefully, before this toxin kills me,* he failed to add.

“You’re serious?”
“You imploded an entire weaponized planet into an immense ball of plasma,” Ben said. “This should seem elementary in comparison.”

“Yeah, but I had some inside help.” Finn was hesitant in his admission. Ben raised an eyebrow and cocked his head expectantly.

“You’ll have to enlighten me with the details. I was busy trying to kill you.” Finn reacted with a quick cross to Ben’s jaw. Ben staggered backward in surprise.

Ben didn’t react; he knew he deserved it. “You almost succeeded,” Finn replied resentfully, rubbing his sore knuckles.

“It’s war.” Ben smiled as the pain in his jaw satiated the darkness, providing him the strength that he desperately needed. “You would have killed me, too, if you had the chance.”

“I don’t know anymore,” Finn said. There was something in his eyes, and Ben knew what he was referencing.

“Well, for a trained assassin, you do have a weakness for sparing your enemy.”

“I’m not going to apologize for not killing innocent villagers—”

“Prisoners of war.”

Finn opened his mouth to argue but stopped. “I do have one question. You could have killed me in the forest. You could have finished it; why didn’t you?

“I didn’t care either way,” Ben said as if he still didn’t.

“Why not?”

Ben chewed his lip, looking away. “I had removed you as a threat either way. If you died, then you received your punishment for turning on the Order. If you lived, then you would live knowing
That.

Finn continued to press him further. “Knowing what?”

“That I could.” Ben paused, weighing whether he wanted to give life to the words. “As you could have taken my life on Ilum.”

The former stormtrooper rubbed the back of his neck anxiously. “You, uh, you know about that?”

“So why didn’t you kill me?” Ben asked, avoiding Finn’s question entirely.

Finn shrugged. “It was the right thing to do.”

The former stormtrooper shuffled uncomfortably, “At the time, I chose not to kill you for Rey's sake. She would have... I never got to say... You almost died trying to... Thank you. For saving her life. I don't know how you did it, but Rey was right about you. You're not all bad.” He rubbed the back of his neck again, staring at the floor. “I mean, you're different than I thought.”

“I think...Rey makes me want to be different.” Ben admitted quietly.

Finn nodded in understanding, and Ben assumed she'd had that effect on her friends as well. Silence stretched between them, and he figured that was the end of it. Vulnerability was not something he was comfortable with, and he was thankful for the reprieve. He bent down to shuffle through the trooper armor in search of the standard issue chrono, knowing the shift change was drawing nearer.

“You're wrong, you know.”

Ben’s hands stilled, the search forgotten. Raising his eyes, he met Finn's in a silent question. “You said Rey makes you want to be different, but that's not true. You spared my life on Taunul before you ever met Rey. I know you somehow saw the conflict inside me, and you let me live. Maybe...this is who you've always been, and you've finally found the person who makes you want to be yourself for once. You're not like the rest of the First Order, trust me, I would know.”
Ben was speechless. Finn's eyes were open and bright with truth. This man, who had every reason to hate him—who had nearly died by his hand, who had lost friends and heroes because of him—believed he was good when everyone else had only seen the monster. His throat felt tight as he swallowed the swell of this new emotion. This validation, this acceptance was foreign, its vulnerability unpracticed and disquieting. But he found himself grinning despite himself. He nodded once in appreciation, the best he could do at the moment, and changed the subject to return to something safe and familiar. “All right, I have to know—on Starkiller, who was the inside man?”

“Woman,” Finn corrected. “Phasma lowered the shields, with a little persuasion from...from Han.” Ben studied him skeptically for a moment. A soft chuckle rumbled in his chest, growing in intensity until he was doubled over in laughter.

“I guess we’re all traitors,” he realized amusedly, squatting to resume his search for the chrono. “If her loyal troopers only knew... ah, here it is.” Ben stood with it between his fingers, calculating the time left. “Okay, Finn, we’ve got under three minutes until shift change. Remember—get Rose, evade detection, find the Falcon, wait for Rey, get her and your fiancée as far from this destroyer as possible.”

"Is that all?” Finn quipped. Ben grasped him firmly by the shoulders and pinned him with his eyes.

“I need you to promise me you will do whatever you need to do, kill whomever you need to kill to get... her... off... this... ship. And promise me, after this ends, you’ll take care of her. She’ll need you.” His voice was rough to his own ears. He hoped Finn hadn't noticed.

“Okay, Ben, I promise,” Finn assured him. “But you need to do one thing for me.”

Ben raised his eyebrows in shock, taken aback by his sudden boldness. “Oh?”

“Don’t make me carry this secret for you. Tell her you love her.” Finn stared at him earnestly, as he swallowed his words.

What will she do if she knows the truth?

“Well, there goes my plan of pretending I hate her, so she’d leave me here,” Ben chuckled.
“Eh, it’s probably better this way, like Han told me once: ‘women always figure out the truth.’”
Winging it in a battle for the galaxy as his father had succeeded in accomplishing decades before,
Ben knew it was closest he would come to receiving the advice from him that he desperately
needed.

_That is definitely something he would say._

"Ah, yes. Well, my father was a wise man. I might as well heed his advice for once,” he mused.
“But I have two more requests of my own. One, I need you to hit me again.” Finn immediately
obliged his request without a moment’s thought.

“And the second?” Finn smirked. Ben returned the smile as he wiped blood from his lip.

“How do you feel about wearing a stormtrooper uniform again?”
Chapter End Notes

Violence

One character hits another character
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“Hello?” Rey asked, walking into the underground room in Maz Kanata’s castle on Takodana. She
knew what was calling out to her. Opening the lid of the old chest, Rey grasped for the lightsaber she knew was hidden in there. It was broken in half. At her touch, a wall fell away, and a dark cave loomed before her.

“Ben, where are you?” Sprinting into the darkness, a bright indigo light illuminated her way as she searched for him. She glanced down to see her new lightsaber in her hands. Rey skidded to a stop as she found Ben at the end of the tunnel. He stood in front of a wall, lightsaber at his side, his head lowered in resignation.

“Ben?” she asked cautiously. He pivoted slightly to glance in her direction, a wistful expression on his face. Before she could reach him, he stepped through the wall. But it wasn’t a wall. It was a mirror. She remembered it well from her experience in the cave on Ahch-To. Her footsteps echoed through the cave as she stepped closer. She reached her fingers toward the mirror, expecting them to pass through, but they pressed against the reflective surface. The frosted mirror transformed under her touch until his reflection emerged in front of her. His pained eyes held hers in reverence, then he turned away. She was left staring at her own reflection. “Ben!” she called after him, beating her fists against the mirror to find a way to him, “Come back!”

Am I dead?

Rey awoke to a state somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness. She was vaguely aware of an aching pain throughout her body. Her head was spinning and her body weak, but she was alive. She was too weak to lift her head, but she heard the soft thud of boots approaching. First, her legs, then her arms were released from the binders.

She fell forward, her knees too weak to hold her, but she was caught by strong arms. The arms carried her across the platform and over the extendable walkway. He was heading for the far side of the room. Glancing up in her daze, she saw the profile of her bondmate. Her heart leapt in her chest. She tried to form words, but her throat wouldn’t work.

Ben? You’re alive!

Her muscles felt paralyzed as she struggled to sit up and embrace him. His hair fell loosely over his forehead, his blue eyes staring off into the distance. He gripped her tightly against the black cloth of his uniform. The room around her was spinning, but she felt safe in his arms.

I knew you would come for me.
Chuckling to himself, he turned to look at her. He gasped and dropped her roughly on the floor. The jolt brought her quickly back to awareness. Pain, sound, and light fully returned. The vision of Ben was replaced by Hux, staring at her in disbelief. The surprise was evident on his face; he thought she was dead.

The ghost of the electricity bounced around inside of her, draining her muscles of energy. Her body screamed as she attempted to sit up. Hux backed away from her, reaching for her lightsaber on his belt. She tried to connect to the Force and felt the beautiful sensation of energy flowing around her. She focused on his energy...on his throat...and squeezed.

Darkness surged through her veins, gifting her strength as she reveled in the gagging sounds in front of her. Hux grasped at his neck desperately, but she only constricted the Force tighter around his throat. She summoned her lightsaber from his belt. His eyes widened, dumbfounded by the sudden change in events.

‘Where's Ben?’

"Ren? He's dead," he choked. “Like you should be.”

No!

The darkness flared inside her, and her grip on his throat tightened. “You're wrong. He can't be. I...I would know.” Even as she said the words, there was a growing bloom of fear tucked right behind her heart. She should have been able to feel his bright and unstable energy in the Force. Closing her eyes, she searched deeper. She could feel five other Force-sensitives nearby—Jacen and Jaina’s energy setting fire to her blood. But there was one familiar energy missing.

I can’t feel him.

"What have you done?" she growled through her teeth. She let the darkness flow through her, delivering power to her weak muscles. As her fingers clenched tighter, nails piercing into her palm, she collapsed his windpipe further. His face grew red as she squeezed with everything she had. Her body shook from the rage that continued to build. Hux clawed at his throat and tried to wiggle free as she lifted him off the ground. He kicked violently in desperation, but she refused to release him.

Rey’s fear and anger built uncontrollably in the Force, overwhelming her senses. She knew what would come but cared little to stop it. The emotions intensified past the breaking point. She
screamed as her rage exploded out into the Force, knocking them both in opposite directions across the chamber.

Chapter End Notes

Violence

One character force chokes another character
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"Where is she!?” Ben pounded the screen at the guard station as he realized Rey was not in any of the detention cells or interrogation rooms. His access codes had surprisingly still gained him entry, but they were of little help. He may not have known her prisoner identification number, but it should have been simple to guess. Only two prisoners had been entered into the database in the last cycle—one male and one female: Finn and Rose. There had been no Force cages activated to house her. There were no excess guards posted. Everything about the missing mandatory security precautions suggested a Force-user was not being contained on the ship.

Ben knelt next to the guard who was coughing up blood on the floor. The man’s hands covered the charred evidence of a lightsaber wound to the stomach. It was the guard’s actions that had forced them into that predicament. He had recognized Ben by his weapon and bravely attempted to alert upper command with a silent alarm. Ben, thankfully, had been faster. He wished he had the assistance of the Force; he could have plucked the information from the man's mind comparatively painlessly. As it were, he had to resort to more…old-fashioned measures. Ben held the lightsaber to the guard’s throat.

"Where is the Jedi?"

"I'm not scared of your lightsaber, Kylo Ren. I'm already dying. What is the threat of more death to me?" the guard challenged.

"Ah, this is not a threat; it's a promise,” Ben murmured, glancing away from the guard's face to admire the weapon. “There are worse scenarios for you than death....” Darkness flared inside him, and the man startled. Ben wondered briefly if he could see the darkness in Ben’s eyes. He understood he was subconsciously connecting to the darkness of the Force; he could feel it feed on his emotions, though he couldn't control it.

*It’s returning as I weaken.*

The cold nothingness that flowed through him was satisfyingly familiar...and comforting. He smiled darkly as he stabbed his fingers deep into the guard's melted flesh. Ben knew the instability of his lightsaber left wounds that were less uniformly cauterized, and with a little effort, he could tear through to the sensitive tissue below. The man cried out in agony. He curled his fingers and dug his nails into the exposed tissue. “I will tear you apart piece by piece until I find her. The longer this takes, the more painful it will be. I will end your suffering the second you tell me—"

“All right!” the guard screamed. Ben chuckled at how easily he had broken. "Supreme Leader Hux
took her! You're wasting your time! She's dead!"

No... she can’t....

As Ben’s blood turned to ice, he searched the man’s eyes for a lie but found none.

No!

"Where!" he demanded, his voice broken with emotion.

"Weapons Development!"

*Force Destiny. He plans to bring back Sidious through her!*

Ben granted the guard the swift death he had promised.

“Blue, let’s go!” he shouted. The droid came out of hiding where Ben had left him down the corridor. As Blue passed the dead guard, Ben knew the droid understood exactly what he had done. It was all he could do to spare him from witnessing it. Ben expected Blue to question him, but he remained silent at his side. The droid wasn’t Force-sensitive, but he knew Ben. He knew Ben was doing everything he could to keep it together.

Ben’s head felt heavy, his vision distorted as the corridors seemed to tilt and close in upon him. His chest heaved in labored pants, the only sound the sluggish thud of his heartbeat in his ears. Bracing one hand against the wall, he staggered through the corridors, the lightsaber still activated and melting a line in the floor behind him. Ben loved her, he *loved* her, but Ben knew that the Force had a habit of taking everything he loved away from him, and it *terrified* him.

Two officers crossed his path and he sloppily, but mercilessly, cut them down before they had even realized what was happening. He had attempted to drag them to him with the Force, temporarily forgetting that he no longer possessed that connection. The shudder in his arm when he struck them made it seem as if he had never held a lightsaber before. If it came down to combat, for the first time since Starkiller, he didn’t trust himself.
If Rey...if Sidious is alive, it’s hopeless without the Force.

Blue twittered in fear, which only served to fuel Ben’s emotions. Rage coursed through his veins. The darkness found him there, and, with that darkness, strength. He breathed the soothing cold deeply and straightened. His head felt lighter, clearer. He swung his lightsaber in anticipation. I will kill them all. Nothing can stop me from getting to her. Nothing else matters as long as she....

He rounded a corner in the corridor and saw the blastdoor. He knew with every last cell of his body that she was behind that door, as if a string connected him to the person behind it. There was no doubt in his mind that Rey was in there, but he had no idea in what capacity. He still couldn't feel anything in the Force, even her. The anger gave way to fear.

I can't open that door. I can't know. I can't do this.

His heart crashed against his ribs with dread, squeezing the air from his lungs. His knees weakened as he stepped closer, threatening to deny the burden of his weight. He was losing the strength that fed off his rage. Nausea rolled through him, tightening in his throat, but his boots echoed rhythmically in the silence as they pulled him closer to the door. He imagined the door opening, the light of the corridor illuminating her body hanging lifelessly from the machine. Or, worse, revealing her as perfectly alive, but her soul gone, replaced by the creature of his nightmares. His eyes glossed over and his lip quivered. This was it. He couldn't escape the fear of what he would find. Please.... Steeling himself, he raised the lightsaber, forcing himself to take the last step forward. The door opened to darkness.

A sudden blast crashed into his chest, and he flew backward into the corridor. With a ragged gasp, he tried to suck air into his dazed lungs. His body fought him, but he finally felt the cool relief of oxygen. Now that he could breathe, and his mind was no longer focused on immediate survival, he was rewarded by experiencing the delayed onset of pain in his chest. It hadn’t been the first time he had experienced the phenomenon from a wound, but it did serve as a reminder that he had been shot. Blue was at his side in an instant, beeping shrilly in panic. Still on his back, he searched his chest to assess the extent of the damage, but there was no injury. The impact had merely knocked the wind out of him.

The Force.

His eyes lifted to the open entryway into Force Destiny. An unstable purple saberstaff appeared out of the darkness, a shadow slowly advancing upon him. He recognized it; he had seen it before, in a vision. When the figure reached the doorway, it stopped. The plasma disappeared into its chamber.
"Ben?" the voice asked warily. Relief flooded his senses.

Rey.

He struggled to his feet. Rey gasped and moved into the light. Her hand covered her mouth. Ben could hear her soft sobs, but she looked physically unharmed other than the odd scratch or bruise. What concerned him most was that she was frozen in place, her face difficult to read. She almost looked terrified of him. The black toxin branching up his neck and likely into his face was horrifying, making him look more like the monster he was. But it was Rey, she never feared him. He deactivated his lightsaber to ease her fear. “I’m here,” he assured her. “It’s okay, I’m here.”

Why did she attack me? Did the machine do something to her mind? Is it even Rey?

Blue beeped curiously, and she visibly brightened, something uniquely Rey that Sidious would never be able to replicate. He had hope. “Finn and Rose are waiting for us,” he tried, but that only served to increase the furrow in her brow. Ben stepped closer but hesitated when she instinctively stepped away from him. “Rey?”

Ben ached to run to her, to hold her, but he was leery of frightening her. He made a show of returning the lightsaber to his belt and holding his hands non-threateningly in front of him. Still, she stared at him like he would hurt her; there was recognition in her eyes, but also fear. Walking uncertainly toward her, he tried to find something, anything, to say to her.

"I know what you're thinking," he said hesitantly, lifting the corner of his mouth in a further attempt to soothe her, "but I don’t have a cowl or anything to put on over this ridiculous vest." A sob escaped her throat, and she sprinted from the doorway. He barely caught her as she launched herself into his arms, stepping back to steady himself. She threw her legs around him, and he pulled her against him. He closed his eyes and held her there, breathing her in. His shoulders sagged, a shuddering exhale escaping his lips. He wasn't too late; Rey was alive. He sighed in contentment as he felt her heartbeat against him. A torrent of foreign emotions from her poured into him. The bond was still intact; he could only just feel the surface of it, but it was there.

“You said ‘Ben,’” she cried.

He nodded against her warm skin. It was only then that he realized how cold he was. “You were right about me, sweetheart,” he whispered as his tears fell unbidden onto her skin. “You’ve always been right about me. I am Ben.”
Rey startled and pulled away from him, cupping his face in her hands so she could study his eyes. At first, he believed it was in search of the truth, but whatever she was looking for, she couldn’t find within them.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, voice trembling. “Is it the poison? Why are you crying?”

Ben smiled through his tears and allowed his head to fall to her shoulder again. "I thought you were dead," he rasped, squeezing her tighter. "I came to rescue you, but I should have known you wouldn't need rescuing."

"How did you get here?" she asked as she swept his hair from his face, gently examining the wound from the crash as best she could as he leaned against her. *The crash.* If he had been told the crash occurred a lifetime ago, he would have believed it. The entire galaxy as he knew it had changed since then. “I thought when I saw you that this was some awful trick of my mind. I thought it was another vision, because you couldn’t be here like this. I saw what they did to you. I thought you were dead!"

He wrapped his arm tighter around her back. “It’s me, I promise. It took me longer than I wanted to get here, but I’m here now.”

“I thought I would never get the chance to tell you that I’m sorry.” Her voice was muffled by his shoulder, but she made no effort to separate herself at all from him. “I’m sorry I kept the whispers from you and betrayed you and hurt you and shut you out to save you from my darkness. Please tell me you know that I didn’t hate you. Please.” Ben nodded reassuringly. He knew. Of course, he knew. He hadn’t allowed himself to believe it, but he knew. Had she feared that entire time that he hadn’t known the truth?

“I’m sorry, too,” he whispered. “You shouldn’t have had to find out about your parents like that.”

Rey shook her head against his shoulder. “I don’t care. As long as you’re okay, I don’t care about any of it.” Ben knew there was another truth that he needed to admit to her. She deserved to know.

“Rey?” he whispered hoarsely into her hair. He knew she sensed his quickening pulse.

*I love you.*
“That saberstaff—it suits you,” he said instead, internally cursing his weakness.

“You kept your promise,” she murmured against him. He closed his eyes and held her tightly.

“I always keep my promises.” And I have one I made to Hux. I have to destroy it all. We’re running out of time. "Now you can make me a promise. Finn and Rose are waiting for you by the Emergency Bridge. I need you to take the bridge. When both bridges have fallen, the Millennium Falcon is waiting down in the main hanger. Promise me, no matter what, you’ll leave on that ship."

Rey pulled away from him, searching his eyes again. His tone must have been as grim as he felt. “I’m not making that promise unless you promise that you’ll be on that ship with me, Ben.” He could feel his life force weakening. Though it was an inevitability that he would go down with the ship, it was becoming increasingly clear that he might not make it that far. He had thought he had made his peace with death, but holding her in his arms made him want impossible things. He wanted to live, more than anything; a desire he didn't remember craving even as a small child.

His thoughts had always centered on ending the pain or the conflict or the people that had wronged him. Life had only ever equaled suffering. Not with her. He wanted a life with her by his side, in whatever capacity she would allow, finding new ways to make her smile. He lamented not understanding what was important before; not realizing that he could have had it. In his mind, it had been too late. But it never truly had been, not as it was now. Though it did seem fitting that when he finally faced his death, only then would he have a reason to live. At least his death would ensure her life. He could accept that. Though she wouldn’t promise to leave him behind, he trusted Finn would ensure her safety.

“What about Force Destiny?” she asked. “Should we destroy it?”

He stared into the room longingly. It called to him, tempting him to take the time to bring back the one man who deserved to be given life by that machine. I’ll come back, he promised. They were running out of time; the bridges had to fall before the Order suspected the treachery. They would only have one chance. The galaxy was counting on them. “We can’t. Not yet. The controls have to be destroyed on the Command Bridge first.”

"Why can't I feel you in the Force?” she wondered, twisting her fingers into the material around his shoulders as if she were afraid she would be ripped away from him at any moment. He sighed. They were finally together instead of across the galaxy. The Force couldn't rip them apart anymore. But his impending destiny would, and he didn't have the courage to tell her the things she needed to hear.
"The toxins…" he said. "I can't feel anything. I lost my connection to the Force."

"You made it all the way to me without the use of the Force. How?"

"Dumb luck. And impulsive, half-thought out plans that were just crazy enough to work. I learned from the best," he smirked. "I've got a couple more up my sleeve if you'll help me. Now we really need to go before they figure out that I'm here. Where's Hux?"

He could see the darkness rooting deeply in her eyes with those words. "He's dead."

"The darkness is returning, Rey," he warned. It terrified him, because soon he wouldn't be on the other side of the bond to help her. He chewed his lip as he watched the change in her.

"I have felt its hold over me ever since I slaughtered the Hutts holding us hostage. I enjoyed it, Ben. It’s not Sidious, it’s just… power. And it felt satisfying to squeeze the breath out of Hux's lungs for what he did to you. The anger gave me strength I didn’t know I had. I am so much more powerful when I feed off the darkness."

His stomach dropped; he hated himself for what she was becoming because of him. He remembered how profoundly he had wanted her to understand the darkness, how he ached for this moment, but now...it terrified him. She was too good to fall. He set her down and studied her eyes.

"Rey, you have to resist the darkness," he begged. "Please...don't underestimate its power. It's easier than you think to end up like me. Promise me you'll resist it, Rey. I don't want this pain and conflict for you."

Her brows furrowed in confusion. "To resist the darkness is to resist you."

"Then resist me if you have to, but I can't let you become me."

“You’ll just have to be there to help me resist it,” she smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. There was an uneasiness there, a question, and he knew what she wanted. He couldn't reassure her that he'd be okay. She needed to know the truth, but he couldn't find the courage to say the words.
"We don't have much time," he said instead. He searched for the strength to walk. As the anger and fear faded, so did the darkness that devoured it.

Please not yet, he pleaded with the Force. I have to finish this.

Ben groaned as a wave of weakness crashed over him, and he collapsed against the corridor wall to steady himself. Blue pushed against his leg, trying to steady him. Rey braced herself against him, concern flooding her features. She knew. She knew right then how dire his situation was. "No, Ben," she gasped, tracing her fingers along the black branching up the side of his face, "what about you? We have to get you to the medbay." He searched her eyes and smiled remorsefully. He shook his head gently as tears fell from her eyes, threatening to cause the release of his own.

He gently cupped her face in his large hands. Her eyes were defiant. He could tell her thoughts were still consumed with saving him, but he wasn’t worthy of her tears. "This is far greater than my life, Rey. The Resistance is relying on me to bring the defenses down. I need to destroy the First Order. That's all that matters," he said firmly. He wiped her tears with his thumbs, and she smiled.

Rey, however, had no intention of backing down. "If you're taking down the First Order, then I'm doing it with you. Then after, we find you a medbay." Force, he loved her for her strength and bravery. She was a fighter. He needed her to help him bring the bridges down. But then she would have to leave him.

“We’ll worry about that after this is over," he whispered

"Fine. But I'm not leaving this ship without you, Ben. That's a promise.”
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Injury and brief torture of a minor character
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Rey felt an energy rippling underneath her skin. It wasn’t the after-effects of the Force lightning; she remembered how that felt. No, this was different. She was different. Something had happened to her inside Force Destiny, and she didn’t understand what. Had it taken something from her? She tested her Force powers by nudging the droid back and forth, but he was too distracted to notice.

Blue watched Ben closely as they moved down the corridors. Rey knew Blue’s concern matched her own. Ben was distracted with whatever plan he was contemplating in his head, so she stared at his face, analyzing every detail, every twitch of expression. He wasn’t telling her something. She did know he was in need of a med bay. He was growing weaker. Delaying medical care could leave lasting damage. What if the Force never returned?

The side of his face was slowly being consumed by the poison of darkness, but his eyes had never looked less...conflicted. He was facing the task of bringing down the entire First Order, without any help from the Force. She could still feel his anger—his darkness—radiating through the bond, but no conflict. The last time she had felt him so calm and sure—so resolute—was when she was on her knees before him in the throne room.

He’s here. He’s really here. And this isn’t the conflicted Ben I knew. This is the true Ben Solo. He still has darkness, he still has his past, but he is no longer tearing himself apart. He is following his heart and doing what he knows is right. It’s just him and what he wants...not the manipulations and desires of others. He’s finally just being Ben. And I love him more for it. Not only did he come for me, but he is helping the Resistance take down the First Order. He’s changed. He’s the man I knew he could be.

The problem was, that didn’t ease her fear. Something deep inside her, something knowing, screamed to render him unconscious and drag him back to the Falcon. But something else was begging her to wait, have patience, have hope. Everything would be okay as long as she never lost hope. Ben was doing everything she had ever hoped for; he would end the war. Still, she felt the impending weight of their destiny upon them. She didn’t fear for him. He was strong, powerful, and smart. He’d had dangerous wounds before and fought through it; he had survived much worse. She believed he could save the galaxy without the Force.

So why do I feel like time is running out? What is he not telling me?

Ben caught her staring at him and frowned until she reached up and swept his hair from his face.
There was a shadow of a smile that flashed across his lips. He looked so different in the clothes he had found. Save for his memories, she had never seen him in any color other than black. The deep, blood-red looked good on him. If he had found the clothes on the Falcon, she knew who they must have belonged to. The sleeves were rolled up, and the top buttons were left undone due to their size difference. The black vest reminded her of Han, but it fit him well.

Her thoughts were interrupted by his strong hand on her arm, halting her progress. Blue whirred at him in confusion. He didn't speak for a moment, pacing erratically. He stopped abruptly and pinned her with his stare. “Rey, I have to tell you something that I should have told you before; but if I don't tell you now, I might never get the chance to tell you.” They had stopped in front of a large viewport, ships blasting by in the immense firefight outside. But his eyes never left hers. Stars and bright orange fireballs reflected in them as he stared at her, chewing his words anxiously.

“Ben?”

She could imagine it, him telling her the news that weighed on his mind. Was she losing him again? Would she be forced to leave on the Falcon without him for the last time? His hand gently cupped her cheek.

“Rey…” There was a warning in the Force, and she sensed that members of the enemy were near. She grabbed Ben by the arm, pulling him into a nearby room. Blue skidded into the room just as the first two troopers rounded the corner.

She slammed Ben back against the inside wall, pressing herself against him to avoid detection through the open entryway. She closed her eyes to sense the troopers as they passed by in the corridor, thankful that they did not spare even a passing glance her way, but stopping instead a few doors down in what she presumed was a storage room. They couldn't leave yet without risking being discovered. Rey opened her eyes to tell him, only to be distracted by the heaving expanse of his chest. It was only then that she realized their proximity. Her splayed hands were pressed against his taut muscles, pinning him to the wall. She found the courage to look up at him, and her heartbeat immediately quickened as his piercing stare set fire to her blood.

"I could sense stormtroopers in the corridor," she whispered. “We can't leave yet.”

His ordinarily soft brown eyes were dark—pupils blown wide. A shiver ran down her spine at his suddenly feral appearance. There was no mistaking that dangerous look. There were no mental barriers strong enough to hide that fierce hunger. There was no denying that it mirrored the burning desire coursing through her veins. The only sound was his uneven, panting breath, as his chest surged in a struggle between fear and passion. They both shuddered as her hands willed themselves to trail down the length of his torso, fingers tracing the defined indentations on the plains of his abdomen. Her hands stopped when she reached the coarse material of his trousers, heat settling
low in her belly as she hesitated. A body had only ever been a vessel until him. Touching him, feeling his body, though, brought forth strange sensations of admiration, and a desire to see and touch more. And to be touched by him.

The tension between them was undeniable—they were two magnets of opposing polarity, the—literal—force between them, dragging them together. Their bond sparked around them, the air in the room was heavy with implication...and consequence. They were destined for this, she reasoned. Whatever this was. She was naïve to the mechanics and the experience of passion, but not the meaning of these feelings. They guided her like the Force, telling her through increasing physical sensations exactly what she wanted.

They were supposed to be together, in every definition of the word. He was meant to be her belonging, and she was meant to be his. Her senses were consumed with every last physical detail about him—his unique scent, the warmth and strength of his body underneath her fingertips, the small part in his expressive lips, the need in his eyes, the rhythmic beat of his heart pulsing in a vein on his neck, the way he whispered her name like a prayer...and a warning. “Rey.” Every cell in her body craved to feel the touch of his lips against hers, to show him her love in a way she had never considered showing anyone love before.

When his lips were only a breath away, he hesitated. “Wait,” he croaked. She pulled back away from him, and he shuddered at the loss. The rejection must have been clear on her face, because he hastily cleared his throat and stumbled over his words as he found an explanation. “I want to kiss you; Force, I want to kiss you, but I…I need to tell you...there’s something that you need to know first.” Groaning, he tilted his head back against the wall and shut his eyes. Evidently, he wasn’t ready to tell her, either.

Her mind was heavy with thoughts of disappointment and humiliation. She looked away from him, and for the first time, she noticed the room around them. They stood in a dark room, a projection of bright stars surrounding them. Her fingers trailed aimlessly through the small, white orbs. His words had resonated with truth, but the darkness seeping through her from her desire and the resulting fear of rejection, suggested an alternate theory.

Or maybe he doesn't want to kiss you. He said he needs to tell you something. He needs to tell you about how you were only a bet.

Her mind recalled the images of Jaina kissing Ben in his memories, and in the snow on Ilum. Jaina's words had sparked the insecurities of Rey's past, spreading like poison, leaving distrust in its wake.

Don’t touch him? Oh, scavenger, I already have. Over, and over again. We know each other
very intimately. Did he not tell you about us?

I don’t think he’s touched her, has he, scavenger? He couldn’t bring himself to touch something so repulsive.

You know you were just a bet, right? Between the Knights? After you sliced open his face, he was convinced he could seduce you to the dark side. But you must have known; you couldn’t be that naïve. Why else would the leader of the galaxy—who already had a woman who gave him everything he wanted—desire a desert rat like you? You’re a nobody. He just wanted your power.

You're nothing... You're nothing... You're nothing... the words repeated endlessly in Rey’s head.

“I already know what you need to tell me, Ben,” she said softly, the tears she restrained evident in her voice. “Kissing a nothing, desert rat, scavenger like me is repulsive to you.”

Ben’s breath hitched, and his eyes snapped open. The darkness in his eyes was all but gone, her words instantly sobering the feral desire that had consumed his senses. He cupped her face in his large hands, tilting his head down to study her, eyes wide in incredulity. “Desert rat scavenger? Is that what you honestly believe I think of you? You're not ‘nothing.’ Not to me, Rey. I told you that. How could you...I could never be...where is this coming from?”

“Why would you want a nobody like me for anything more than my power, when you have someone like Jaina,” she intoned derisively.

Ben played the part of the confused bondmate all too well. “Why would I...what is going on? I’m lost. I thought—”

Rey tried to not allow the resentment to bleed through in her voice, but she could hear her failure. “That's what Jaina told me before she kissed you,” she spat. “She said you knew each other very intimately.”

Ben straightened defensively, frowning, his voice a harsh whisper to avoid detection. “First of all, Jaina and I never kissed—”
Rey couldn't control the shout that escaped her throat. “Liar! I saw your memories of the temple!”

They both froze, fearful of their inevitable discovery. Rey felt into the Force, but the troopers seemed too busy to pay them any mind. She released the breath she was holding. Ben reached to touch her, but she pulled away. “Rey, that wasn't...she did that as a joke.”

The memories Jaina had pushed into Rey’s mind replayed in vivid detail. Each touch of his lips, each unsteady breath, each soft whimper was torturous and inciting. Rey had seen Jaina kiss Ben before her very eyes; it had seemed comfortable and familiar. “Well, it didn't seem like a joke when she kissed you on Ilum.”

Ben opened his mouth, then closed it. His hand reached for her, but hesitated. He shook his head, lips pressed together firmly. He seemed as lost as he claimed. “I know I don't have all of my faculties, sweetheart, but I never...I remember it differently. I remember Jacen kissing you on Ilum. He hurt you, and I could do nothing. That I'm sorry for; not some imaginary thing between Jaina and me.”

“It wasn’t imaginary,” her voice was low, but biting, like the ice flooding her veins. “I had to watch as Jaina climbed in your lap, kissing you before she injected you with that poison. It was sickening.”

Ben shifted back on his heels and stared at her, his hand covering his mouth. She would have assumed he was angry if she didn’t see the mirth in his eyes. Is he... is he trying not to laugh? She wouldn’t doubt it; the man truly was unpredictable. “Rey, I was unconscious on Ilum.”

His logic was no match for her darkness, however. “What about the memories Jaina showed me of you and her...together. I saw everything!”

“What memories?” he asked with his brows furrowed, eyes narrowed. There was not a flicker of fear in understanding her discovery. Ben looked clueless, but Rey knew what she saw, and, worse, what she heard.

“The memories of you...intimate together, Ben; at the temple, and on the Supremacy.”

“No! We never...” Ben stepped toward Rey, but she backed away from him, shaking her head to force him—and her vulnerable emotions—away. Ben waited until she met his vehement stare. “That never happened,” he murmured. “She’s strong in telepathy, Rey, and mind persuasion. She
must have implanted false memories. I don’t know what you saw, but you also can’t fault me for memories I didn’t participate in. If she knew—"

“What about the bet? Can I fault you for that?” Rey sniffled, wiping her eyes with shaking hands. She wanted desperately to believe him, but she was so afraid. She didn’t know where this building dread was coming from, all she knew was she finally had what she wanted and she feared something taking that away from her. Nothing good ever stayed. She feared losing him and, if he didn’t want to kiss her, then her own inadequacies must be the reason for it.

“What bet?” Ben said with a sigh. “Was I conscious for this?”

“Just a bet between you and the Knights after Starkiller for you to ‘seduce me to the dark side’ by literally seducing me.” Rey stepped back further into the room. She wrapped her arms around herself, closing the barriers between them as much as she could in preparation for a truth the darkness convinced her would be there.

Ben crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall, staring away from her. “That would be difficult to accomplish, considering I hadn't seen or spoken to them for months before Starkiller, and then I didn't see them again until Ilum.”

“But Snoke admitted that he created the bond to lure me to the Supremacy,” she said through a building tightness in her throat. “And you…I cut open your face, and, instead of trying to kill me, you were telling me stories about your past, walking around without your tunic, and comforting me by the fire. What am I supposed to think?”

His eyes swept from the far wall to the floor, but then his stare remained there as if he feared what he would find in her eyes. When he finally dragged his eyes to hers, they were pleading. “Rey, do you honestly believe I would do that?”

“I….”

No, that deep, honest part of her, unaffected by the darkness, whispered. No, he would never do that. You know why he wouldn’t. She knew the truth, but she couldn’t understand, “Why? Why would someone like you want someone like me, Ben, when you could have anyone you want in the galaxy?”

“Someone like me?” He laughed something humorless and self-deprecating. “What, a monster?”
Because someone like me, doesn’t* deserve* someone like you. But you know what? This isn’t about that. I know you don’t trust anyone because of your past, but you need to trust me. There was no bet. I would* never* have made that bet, even when you were still my enemy. Rey, I have never...” He swallowed, glancing away. “I have never even kissed anyone, okay? Jaina kissed me once at the temple as a joke, and, apparently, once on Ilum too, but it’s not the same. I never cared about anyone enough to willingly give any part of myself; I would never have wasted that on an enemy. I have never let anyone in as close as I have you.”

His reassuring words melted away the darkness in a way she had never experienced before. It was as if he had a power over her that could bring her instant peace. If she had to fight the darkness for the rest of her life, she needed him. She would have been lost without him. She had been cruel, again, and here he was forgiving her in ways he had never forgiven anyone. *You have no idea how special you are, do you?* When she finally spoke, her voice was small. “Nothing happened between you and Jaina?”

“You have seen in my memories everything that has happened between us.”

Ben stepped forward off the wall, but this time she didn’t back away. His eyes never left hers as he came to stand before her. When she lowered her barriers, she found his side of the bond completely open. The strength of the light she felt from him was overwhelming but peaceful. Rey tucked her hair behind her ear. “Even though she is incredibly beautiful?”

His hand lifted to her face, gently tracing her cheekbone with his thumb. In a dulcet murmur, he told her, “But not to me.” He was...everything. That was the only way she could describe what he meant to her. She studied his eyes, nose, his lips, down to the tree of black climbing up the side of his face. The fear of losing him was still pervasive, even without the darkness. Without the darkness, however, Rey knew where to focus that fear. It was easier to fear lies than the truth. It wasn’t another woman that she so deeply feared would take him away from her, but death. It struck her then that it was entirely in the realm of possibility that he could die. She wished her fears could return to something as inconsequential as another woman.

*Stay with me, Ben; we’ll get you to a medbay.*

Rey quickly searched the corridor, but the stormtroopers were still blocking their only exit. There was something that changed in him over the bond as he studied her, something almost rueful that brought her attention back to him. “Are you angry with me? For listening to the darkness?” she asked.

“No, just confused,” he said, focusing on the way his thumb slid over her cheekbone. His hands were so cold. “Why does it matter so much to you?”
“What?”

Did what matter to her?

“Hear me out, Rey,” he said with a sigh, dropping his hand from her face. “Even if I had kissed her, even if there was something between us—which there is not, for the record—how is that worse than you kissing Poe?”

“I was protecting you, Ben.” She had explained this before. Was it his turn to doubt her? She turned, walking deeper into the room through the stars. Some systems she recognized, and others she didn't. Crait system, Ileenium system, Barkhesh system, Mustafar system, Takodana system, Jakku system, and the Ilum system. In seconds she had traversed the galaxy. “He is just my general, but you went through training together; she actually means something to you.”

“I just don't see how it's any different,” he said from behind her.

“Well, it is!” she snapped, turning on her heels to face him.

The stars that were flickering between them were bright, but nothing like the burning intensity in his eyes. She could feel the strength of it over the bond. He parted his lips to say something, swallowed it, and then chose something far more consequential. “Why?”

You know why.

He hated hearing it, she knew he did, but it didn’t make it any less true. Everything she felt for him swelled inside of her, crashing against her defenses like a tidal wave and she shouted. “Because I love you, Ben!”

“Not the way I love you!”

Rey wasn’t certain if she gasped or he did, or both. She was too focused on replaying the words over in her thoughts to determine whether it was a hallucination. His body trembled fiercely, but she knew it wasn’t from the toxin; she could feel his heaving emotions over the bond. Even the Force around them went silent as the weight of his confession impacted them both. There was an
entire galaxy between them when he finally raised his eyes, but she could see the truth radiating in them brighter than the Jakku sun.

There was a long moment when Rey fought between collapsing in a sobbing heap on the floor, running away from the overwhelming emotions, and laughing with the purest joy she had ever felt. The ever-present fear grounded her. “You love me?”

“I think there’s a part of me that has always loved you,” Ben answered with a nervous smile. “You had to have known, you had to have felt it.” Certainly, she had felt something from him, but she had never imagined he would love her. For the first time since she had felt his emotions over the bond, each side of their bond mirrored the other perfectly. Rey couldn’t discern where his emotions stopped and hers began. It was both exhilarating and relieving that he felt exactly as she did. Ben loves me. He loves me.

The warmth in her chest faded as her stuttering mind grasped the full meaning of his words. “What do you mean I don’t love you the way you love me?”

Don’t you feel it, too?

“I just...don't understand, Rey. What happened between you and Poe gutted me because, well, because I’m hopelessly in love with you. But Rose doesn’t bother you even though you love Finn. So why does Jaina? Are you afraid she’ll turn me?” Rey could have laughed. It was both sweet and heartbreaking. She knew the deeply entrenched belief of being unlovable better than anyone. She understood his struggle as he understood hers. That was why they were meant for each other.

You foolish, foolish man.

“No, Ben,” she said with a confident smile, “it's not the same thing.”

The warrior of a man stared at her, completely lost on the battlefield of love. “Isn't it?”

“No, because I don't love Finn the way I love you.”

“Don't you?” he asked, and his voice cracked with something fragile like hope.
Rey shook her head, waiting for this highly perceptive man to see the truth. “No, I love Finn like a brother.”

Ben’s breathing increased, his heart stuttering over the bond. She watched him swallow heavily as his eyes bounced back and forth between hers. “And you…you love me like what?” Rey smiled as she watched the implication of her words settle on his face. “Like what, Rey? Say it.”

“I love you in every way it’s possible to love someone,” she said simply. There was a raging conflict in the bond, but this time, he didn’t reject the truth. This time the hope won. “I want everything,” she continued. “I want the dream and everything we imagined we can have after this is over. I want all of it. All of you. You have my heart, and I want yours. I want to be with you.” She stepped forward, encouraged by the warmth of the bond. “I am in love with you, Ben.”

For a moment, Ben looked as if he’d short-circuited. His eyes were wide; he blinked rapidly as he gasped for breath. His voice trembled under the weight if his emotions. “You're in love with me?”

“Yes! Haven’t you been listening?”

“You're in love with me?” He had said it with such incredulity that Rey didn’t understand how the man hadn’t seen it, or at least felt it, until that moment.

She giggled—happy, carefree, weightless. “Yes, Ben! I'm in love with you.”

“You're in love with me.” It was a realization, a statement, a fact. It elicited a genuine, crooked, teeth-baring smile that lit up his entire face.

“I am,” she beamed.

She had never seen so much hope in his eyes. “I have your heart?”

Rey nodded.

Ben looked down for a moment, and when his eyes found hers again, there were tears shining in them. But his smile was young and unburdened and… happy. “Good. You have mine too.”
She walked forward until her palms were pressed against his crimson shirt. Tilting her head to meet his stare, she slid her hands up his chest, clasping them around his neck. He shuddered. This time when he lowered his head, he didn’t stop until his lips were a breath from hers. This time, he didn’t pull away. His hair tickled the heated skin on her face, setting off a chain reaction of nerve endings that cascaded down her body in a shiver. His hand slid up to cup her cheek, and she tried in vain in her close proximity to focus on the emotions in his eyes. She allowed her eyelids to flutter closed when she felt everything she needed to feel over the bond.

The heat of his breath briefly caressed her lips before a new, soft warmth enveloped them. She sighed. It felt like finally being made whole. It should have satiated the building desire that wanted everything him, but she found herself clinging to him in an urgency to be even closer…to have even more. Simple things like the way he breathed and the soft sounds he made, threatened to ruin her. The Force swirled between them, around them, and through them, vibrating with something intense and fate-changing. Their emotions over the bond crackled with fervency, magnetism, and need. It was the warmth and strength of the powerful love between them, however, that left her breathless.

The galaxy rotated around them as he held her, and though she didn’t know where to put her hands or how to breathe or whether she should do something more beside melt in his arms, for one beautiful moment everything was as it should be. The war, the poison, Force Destiny…all were fleetingly forgotten. Their only truth was the heated friction and slide of his lips against hers. Nothing had ever felt or tasted so perfect.

Rey finally pulled away to gasp for breath. Ben’s eyes were glassy and bright and peaceful. The kiss was short, but it had been filled with all the love they had confessed for each other. She smiled, and he returned it. “Was that what you needed to tell me?” she panted.

His smile faded then, a profound sadness crossed his eyes. His nod was slow.

“What's wrong?” she asked with a smile still plastered on her face because she loved him and he loved her…and the conflict that had torn her apart was finally over. They could win this war, and she would have everything she had ever wanted. Their future was filled with hope.

“What if...what if this doesn’t go the way you think?” he asked hesitantly, his stare dropping to the floor. “Would you hate me for telling you?”

The pervasive fear returned, but it was no match for her hope. “What do you mean?”
“What if…what if I don't make it through this?”

You’ll be fine; we’ll get you to a medbay.

Rey wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him to her, pressing his forehead to hers as she closed her eyes and enjoyed this perfect moment when he was hers and there wasn’t a war waiting for them. “Then I'll remember this moment for the rest as my life, because right now I have you, and right now you love me.”

“I should have said it before,” he whispered. “But I didn’t want to tell you, and then… leave you.”

“You're not leaving me, because we're taking the First Order down together, and then we're leaving here together, and then we're going to a medbay together, and then we'll be together like we want.” Ben nodded, but his eyes seemed less convinced.

You’ll see, she wanted to convince them both. Everything will be okay in the end.

“I'll check to see if it's clear,” she said instead.

“We’re running out of time,” he answered. He straightened, adjusting his clothes and settling back into the calm, determined energy of a fierce warrior with a vendetta. “At this point, I'd prefer a fight,”

”Then let's give them a fight, Ben. Together.”
Chapter End Notes

Jealousy

Discussion of Jealousy

Kiss

A kiss between two characters
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In his cockpit, Poe cried out in frustration. The Alliance was getting nowhere in this battle. Ben was right, they could do little damage with the deflector shields still functioning. Of all the different paths this war would take him, Poe never imagined it would come to this. The fate of the Resistance…the Alliance…the Republic…the galaxy…was in the hands of the former Supreme Leader. He had to trust his life—and everyone’s lives he cared about—to his former enemy.

Poe had felt this guilt before—this guilt of misjudging a person. When he committed mutiny against Admiral Holdo, he had done it for the good of the Resistance. At the time, he had believed he was doing the right thing. She had died before he could tell her he had been wrong about her. He wouldn’t make that mistake again.

Ben had been the Supreme Leader of the First Order. Poe had watched Ren kill the people Poe cared for and respected. He had been tortured by him. At the time, there was no reason to trust that Rey was telling the truth about Ren. What Poe did, he had done for the good of the galaxy, or so he had believed. But the guilt he felt now was deserved. He knew what he would have to do after this was over, after Ben pulled this off, but that was the least of his concerns now. First, they had to win this war. Ben Solo was their only hope.

“Everyone fall back,” Poe reluctantly announced into the comms. Incredulous voices overwhelmed his cockpit.

“General, we have gone too far to give up now,” his commander reasoned.

“We are not giving up,” he said. “We have an ally on the inside. He’s going to bring the deflector shields down. We just need to buy him some time.” This was the most difficult part of being a leader. He had no benefit of foresight. He couldn’t read someone’s mind to determine their intentions or wave his hand and have an imaginary energy guide him to the correct choice. All he had was gut instinct, and he had to trust in that. Every single one of their lives was in his hands. All he could do was hope he made the right decision as he watched the fleet retreat out of the Finalizer’s firing range. He had trusted Han Solo to save them all before; now he had to trust his son.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Solo,” he whispered.
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"So how are we going to lower these defenses?" Rey asked quietly as they waited in the shadows. Blue pushed between them, huddling against their legs.

"Well, it won't be simple. Learning from past failures, they have built-in systems to control redundancies. The systems I need to access are on the Command Bridge tower, but they also have an Emergency Bridge tower with direct access at midsection with orders to lock down if the Command Bridge is taken. That one is heavily fortified and impervious to outside attack. Once that room is locked down, there is no getting in. The only weakness is the control system for the entire fleet that Hux created to protect the ship from mutiny. It was created to protect the ship from in-fleet attacks from other destroyers...not in-ship attacks by high ranking officers. With a properly coded rank cylinder, which all the officers wear, we can access any of it, not only disabling the systems for the ship, but for the entire fleet. We'll use Hux's genius against him."

"And how are we going to get one of those cylinder things without risking a lockdown?" Rey asked skeptically.

"I think you forgot that I was the highest-ranking officer on this destroyer," his eyes lit up as he spoke, darkness igniting the residual part of him that was still that powerful man, hellbent on holding the galaxy in his palm. "I already have them. And I am betting everything that Hux hasn’t had the time to disable them." He pulled several metallic cylinders from his belt. He tucked them into the pack around her waist. "What is this?" He pulled out two fractured halves of a Kyber crystal.

"Oh... they're what is left of the crystal from Luke's lightsaber. I didn't want to throw them away when I got my new crystal, so I put them in there and forgot about them. I don't feel as connected to them anymore, not as much as I do to my new one."

"Well, I would hope so, your new one nearly cost you your life," Ben said, and she tried not to think about what it _had_ cost. "There’s something I haven’t been able to rationalize...how did you survive under all that snow for so long?"

"When I fell, I heard your voice in my head telling me to use the Force. So I put my hands out and tried to push the snow away, but I made a small energy barrier around my face instead. It was all because of what you taught me in training. I held it for as long as I could. I don't know how," she whispered, “but I knew you would come for me.”
"Is that how you survived the *Force Destiny*?"

Rey shook her head. "I don't know what happened. I wasn't able to use the Force; I had binders on that blocked everything. I felt all the energy from the crystals, and it overwhelmed me. I passed out and thought I had died, but when I woke, Hux was carrying me from the machine. He thought I was dead. That's how I was able to attack him and escape."

"It doesn't make any sense...unless...the energy was diverted somehow..." She had nothing on her that would divert the energy of the machine. His fingers slid over the rough edges of the broken crystals. "Rey, what if these interrupted the energy? What if these useless, fractured crystals saved your life?"

She contemplated the idea that such a small, seemingly insignificant act of putting something in her pack could completely change her destiny.

*Or was it my destiny to put those crystals in my pack all along?* She thought back to their dreams and visions. *What if everything that has ever happened in our lives led up to this moment?*

“Maybe they'll bring you luck. We'll need it.”

She smiled. “I thought you didn’t believe in luck.”

He smirked in response. "Right now, I’ll believe in whatever it takes. Are you positive you want to do this? The *Millennium Falcon* is—"

“Don't leave this ship without me, Ben.”

He sighed in acceptance. “The Emergency Bridge is directly above us. There are cameras; they will see you coming, so move quickly. Take the code cylinders, hold them up to the scanner, and that'll gain you entry. You'll have seconds before they shut down the mainframe. If they do, you won't be able to get into the system again in time. No hesitation. Kill them all. Lock it down, not just the main door, but the emergency shutdown switch. I'll find a way in on the Command Bridge. You must destroy the defense control computers so the only controls are on the Command Bridge. I will lower all defenses and hold the bridge until the Resistance begins their attack, which means we won’t have a lot of time to escape. You’ll need to be on the ship waiting for me. Do not release the emergency switch or open that blast door until you hear me over this comm.” He handed her the black device, sleek and expensive-looking compared to the ones they carried at the Resistance.
“If this goes sideways, promise me you will not come after me.”

“Ben.”

“Say it.”

"Ben!"

"Say it!"

"I'm not leaving this ship without you." He ran his hand over his face in frustration. She stared unwaveringly at him. She would not bend on this. They were getting off that ship together even if she had to drag him off. His eyes softened. He reached out and ran his thumb down her cheek and over her lips. There was a finality in his touch, a sadness in his eyes as though he was looking upon her for the last time.

She shuddered with dread. “Why are your eyes saying goodbye?”

"I don't know how you can simultaneously be so infuriating and hold such power over me," he said, avoiding her question. She wanted to hold him and never let him go again. She wanted to stop him from doing whatever he was about to do. Perhaps that was why he had foregone a drawn-out, emotional goodbye. Ben pulled her to him, holding her tightly, lips pressed against her hair. Before she could melt into him, before she could say another word, he had released her.

Ben knelt by the droid. “You need to go with Rey. She’ll keep you safe,” he told the droid, then stood. Blue asked him if he would come back for him. “It’ll be all right,” Ben answered instead. She wanted to stop him, but he had already turned, blending into the shadows. Hesitating, he turned to stare at her, his expression unreadable.

You be careful. It took her a moment to realize that he hadn't spoken the words aloud. She swore there was a tear tracing the scar down his face as he disappeared from sight.

“Why are your eyes saying goodbye, Ben?” she whispered to the darkness.
She shook away the dread crawling up her spine. The Resistance needed her. A renewed determination settled over her as she stared up at the command center. She needed to use the turbolift to get up to the Emergency Bridge level. There were no personnel at the lifts, but her exit on the upper level would leave her exposed and vulnerable. She would have to dispatch anyone quickly, then make a run for the bridge before they secured it. “Come on, Blue,” she said, and the droid obediently followed.

The lift doors opened and she slipped inside, pressing herself into the corner. The doors had nearly closed when an armored hand prevented the lift door from closing. She had not seen anyone else around her, but suddenly a stormtrooper and prisoner stepped into the lift. She reacted instinctively and kicked the trooper across the lift, startling him.

"Rey?” the trooper gasped. She froze.

*How does he know my—* She was suddenly wrapped in an embrace by the prisoner.

"Rose!"

Rey wrapped her arms around her friend, thankful that Rose was all right. Rose had a split lip, but was otherwise not worse for wear.

"And Finn!” he shouted from under the helmet. She threw herself against him, knocking him off balance. He chuckled, embracing her tightly.

"How did you escape?” she asked them, her heart flooding with relief. They would bring down the bridges, and it would all be over. They were so close.

"Ky… Ben broke us out,” Finn said. "We took the detainment cell systems offline. Hopefully, it will be long enough to make it to the Emergency Bridge before they discover we’ve escaped.”

"Let’s take down this bridge.”

Rose and Finn exchanged looks before she turned to Rey and smiled conspiratorially. "Let’s end this war. Together."
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See the end of the chapter for more notes
Ben stared at his reflection in the durasteel as he waited in the shadows. The toxin had spread. The euphoric feeling from the toxin was slowly giving way to pain. Ben could feel his body shutting down as the weakness returned. He searched deep for the rage that could give him strength. He could feel the throbbing of the Force around him, although he still could not find a way to connect with it. Luke had told him stories of his "phantom limb" – of feeling sensations in a piece of his body that no longer existed. In that moment, the Force felt like a phantom limb. Only he would much rather do this without an arm or a leg. The Force—it was the blood in his veins. He didn’t know how to exist without it. And now he had to attempt the impossible without something that had become as much a part of him as the legacy it was borne from.

He knew how this would likely end. Though he had set the rods on both the north and south ends of the elevated walkway, he hoped it wouldn’t come down to that—though everything in him suggested it would. He shook his head and tried not to think too many steps ahead. He had to force his way onto the Command Bridge first. Everything that happened after that was out of his control. An officer passed by the hallway, and Ben stepped out from the shadows. He grabbed the high-ranking officer’s shoulder and put his lightsaber hilt against the man’s back.

"Don't move, or I'll activate this plasma blade that will pierce right through you."

The officer turned his head, recoiling at the sight of Ben. Ben figured he looked more monstrous than ever, with the network of black vessels reaching across his face and into the whites of his eyes.

"You," the officer's face twisted in horror. "You're dead!"

“Not yet,” he hissed through clenched teeth. His thumb twitched on the activation switch of the weapon. He suppressed the desire to impale the officer right then and there. Instead, Ben pushed the officer forward, keeping one hand on the man's shoulder and the lightsaber hilt pressed tightly against his back. The officer walked quietly and compliantly, having been the target of Kylo Ren's wrath more than once. The blast doors opened for the officer, and Ben pushed him inside. He activated his lightsaber, thrusting it into the door control panel.

He turned, bracing himself to block the barrage of blaster fire that would inevitably come his way. The officers remained still with weapons in their holsters, however. Their eyes were on the man at the head of the bridge, his hands clasped behind his back, turned away from Ben.
“I envy every person who has never met you,” the man sighed. “You shouldn’t have come back.”

Chapter End Notes

Threat of violence
One character threatens a minor character with a lightsaber
The Bridge

Chapter Notes

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--- CHAPTER 155 ---
Rey, Finn, Rose, and Blue had made it from the lifts onto the elevated walkway that connected to the Emergency Bridge. Rey glanced at Finn and Rose beside her. Rose nodded in encouragement. *Here goes nothing.* Sprinting into view of the cameras, they held the cylinders in front of the sensors, steeling themselves for the battle that awaited them inside. Rey burst through the doors as they opened. Finn joined her in the fight, and Rose moved for the door control panel.

The officers stood, reaching for their weapons. Rey activated her lightsaber and moved toward the officer nearest the mainframe. His blaster fire was ineffective against the quick parries of her weapon, and she felt the power surge through her. She imagined this was how her bondmate felt the day they met on Takodana. *Invincible.* The darkness was back. It fed off the fear in the officer's eyes. There was nothing more comforting to Rey during the heat of battle than the strength the darkness provided her. She felt faster, more aware, more in touch with the Force around her. She felt sadistic exhilaration as she sliced through the officer.

As she watched him fall, he lifted his weapon in a final act of defiance. Her dark concentration was broken as Blue whimpered beside her, pressing himself between two control panels to hide. She opened her mouth to explain when a blaster shot grazed past her, hitting Rose in the leg. The room immediately erupted in blaster fire. Rey realized the bombardment was coming from behind her. She turned to see Finn's eyes wild and enraged, scanning the room in tactical strategy. He may have the kind heart of a man from the Resistance, but he had been trained to be an assassin of the First Order, and it showed. She ducked as beams of plasma flew across the room, but Finn didn't so much as blink as the others returned fire. He howled with rage as he systematically and expertly eliminated his enemies. He didn't stop until he'd slaughtered every last officer in the room in an impressively short amount of time.

"I think you got them!" Rey shouted as he continued firing, even after the last officer fell. With a shake of his head, Finn took off his helmet, breathing heavily in agitation.

“That was the most attractive thing I've ever seen,” Rose breathed.

“What happened to your mantra about not killing those we hate to win this—?” Rey was interrupted by a banging on the blast door. Her eyes raised to a holomonitor. Ben stood outside, screaming at her through the door.

“Rey! Let me in! We’ve got to get out of here! It’s a trap!”

Rey’s heart jumped to her throat as she searched the holomonitor for obvious signs of injury to her bondmate through the black robes that obscured her view. Her stomach churned not only in fear for him, but at the thought that, if he was there, they had failed. Still, something felt… off. Rose rushed toward the blast door, and despite the probability that Ben was in danger, everything in her screamed to stop Rose. There was a warning in the Force, and that was when she realized what was
different about him. The clothes.

There’s more…

“Rose, don’t!” she screamed, but it was too late. As the blast door opened, he rushed into the room. Rey stepped forward, calling a blaster to her hand, and fired it at him. As expected, he didn’t even have a lightsaber to block the bolts aimed for his chest.

Both Finn and Rose turned to her in shock. Blue screamed as the man crumpled to the ground. “Clones!” she warned, “they made clones!” Her friends were distracted by her revelation; they didn’t see the threat stalking through the open door. A squad of stormtroopers entered.

“FN-2187,” a voice acknowledged.
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Death of minor characters by blaster
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"I had to come back," Ben said to the man standing at the viewport. "I made you a promise."

The red-headed man turned, his piercing blue eyes burning into Ben's. "Of all your many weaknesses, Ren, your will to survive is not one of them."

"Of all of your many strengths, Hux, seeing a plan through to its finality is not yours," Ben replied.

"The Knights assured me that you would be dead. Yet here you are. You look like death—but clearly are still very much alive."

Ben smiled mockingly. The ease of the banter did not lessen the dread in his gut. "I would have been dead if they hadn't injected me. So, really, I should thank them."

"I'll make sure they finish the job this time," Hux promised, his voice dripping with disdain. Ben’s eyes tracked the general as he crossed before the viewport. The last time they had seen each other, Hux had nearly been successful in killing him. Ben wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.

When the general came to a stop, Ben noticed a split in the man’s lip. "Shouldn't you be dead in a room in Weapons Development?"

“Oh, yes, the girl you threw everything away for. I don't know what she sees in you. You...the petulant man-child she defeated because you fell apart after killing your father. And I don't know what you see in her. She doesn't share your rabid ruthlessness, Ren; here I am, when she easily could have killed me."

A profound wrath dug its claws into Ben’s control at the mere mention of Rey. "You say she defeated me in my moment of weakness. But you...you're just weak. You will never be strong enough to be—"

"I will be the strongest Supreme Leader the First Order has ever seen!" Hux screeched. "I will
destroy the Resistance and bring order back to the galaxy in a way you or Snoke never could! It is your Force power which has held me back from my true potential! Once you all die, there will be no one left to challenge me! Your weakness has gotten in my way for too long. Do your Force powers help you defy death? They had to be the reason your little Force princess didn't surrender her power to me in my machine. You two just...won't...die!” Ben lost control of the rage when he pictured what Hux had done to Rey. Before Ben had even contemplated his options, his finger flinched on the activation switch and the crimson blade appeared.

He moved toward his former general with his lightsaber raised. Hux drew his blaster pistol and aimed it at him. Hux was able to get off one shot, which Ben easily blocked before he was upon him. Ben swung the lightsaber at Hux, burning his uniform with the tip of his blade and cutting the pistol in half. He sensed a blaster shot behind him from one of the officers and turned to block it, redirecting it at the officer. The other officers began firing across the room, which he returned in their direction. As Ben turned, his former general flipped a monomolecular dagger from his sleeve.

Hot pain shot through Ben's lower back. In one swift move, Hux had stepped forward and embedded the dagger into him. Ben groaned as warmth spread from the wound.

"Your personal interests will always be your weakness, Ren," he smiled.

The pain brought a new strength that Ben grasped onto, drawing the power of the darkness in, letting it consume him. He released his rage on the other officers in the room. Other than a blocked blaster shot or two, they hardly fought back, as if they had resigned themselves to their fate. When he was finished, he deactivated his weapon and groaned, removing the dagger from his lower back.

"The Knights of Ren are on their way," Hux warned. He had backed himself against the control panel on the far side of the bridge. “You stand no chance against them like this.”

“You’re so right,” Ben replied sarcastically. He turned and threw the dagger across the room before the other man could react. It hit Hux in the upper chest with force. The man gasped, eyes widened, as his chest wheezed through the new wound.

“Rey, are you there?” Ben murmured into the comlink.

“Ben?”
He ignited his lightsaber. “We have to change the plan. I’ve got company.”

“So do we,” she answered.
Major characters are stabbed
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See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Rey, are you there?”
“Ben,” she whispered, relieved to hear his voice. She lowered herself behind one of the control systems, preparing for a fight. She had known what would happen if they were caught; they had no choice but to fight. They were severely outnumbered. She closed her eyes as tears fell onto the comlink in her hand. She wished he was there to fight with her.

“Change of plan.” He sounded as if he was struggling with something, perhaps a heavy object in his path. It was the familiar crackle of his weapon that brought her attention away from the weapons in the front of the room. “I’ve got company.”

She dried her tears before replying. “So do we.”

“How?” There was a distant string of curses before she heard his voice closer, panicked. “Who?”

“I’m so sorry. We stormed the bridge. We killed everyone. But there was another clone. I killed him, but Phasma’s here.” There was another curse and then silence, not even the sound of the lightsaber. “Ben, what happened to you?”

“Ben?” He didn’t respond, but she knew. He had changed the plan; something terrible had happened. Her fear for Ben was cast aside for a moment as she realized the consequences.

_We failed._

Her heart sank into the same hopeless despair that it had in the throne room. The failure still stung as if it were yesterday. Ben had saved her, killed their enemy, and they had defeated the Praetorian guard together. It was over, she thought they had won, she thought her friends would be safe. Then she realized Ben had not turned as she had anticipated and all hope had instantly been lost.

This time had been different. The stakes were even higher. Ben had done it, he had turned. Her friends were safe. The Resistance had a chance. Victory had been in their grasp; the galaxy had almost been saved. They could have ended it. There was so much hope, but here they were again. They had all failed. Even if it wasn’t this moment, or this day, they would die. The First Order had won. _Why? Why would the Force intend for our destinies to end in failure!?_ She was broken from her thoughts by the feminine voice at the front of the room.

“You insubordinate, traitorous scum,” Phasma sneered. Rey peeked from behind her hiding place. The chrome armored stormtrooper raised her weapon at Finn. Rey activated her lightsaber, but
Finn waved his hand to signal her to stand down. She did, because she trusted him, but she couldn’t help wonder. *What is your plan?*

“Oh, *I am traitorous scum?*” Finn asked derisively. His eyes and weapon remained fixed on Phasma, but his other hand was sliding discreetly along a control panel. His finger flipped a switch. “Because the evidence might have burned up on Starkiller, but we both know the truth, Phasma. When you had my blaster to your head, *you* lowered the shield at Starkiller. You chose to save your own neck, rather than the thousands of stormtroopers that died when that base exploded. Yes, I’m a traitor. I left the First Order because I didn’t believe in killing innocent civilians. I didn’t want to be beaten down and controlled anymore! I didn’t need a master to tell me what to do or how to think! But what about you? What would happen if your troops discovered the truth? What would happen if they knew that you were the greatest traitor of us all?*

Phasma’s voice sounded impassive through the helmet, but Rey could almost hear the hint of fear underneath. “And why would anyone believe a lie like that?”

“Because they’re not as stupid as you think. The shields *were* lowered. No one on the Resistance had the ability to lower those shields. Who else could have done it? And more importantly, why would I lie?” Rey scanned the room in hope. Several stormtroopers lowered their weapons and looked at each other suspiciously.

Phasma would not be defeated that easily, however. Before any of the stormtroopers had a chance, she had fired her blaster a dozen times, felling every single trooper where they stood.

“You killed them!” Finn shouted. “You killed your own men! That’s treason!”

“Yes, and I will kill as many as it takes to maintain order.” Phasma pointed her weapon directly at Finn. “Any last words?”

“If I had a chance to reach every stormtrooper on this destroyer, I would tell them they are more than a number. I’m more than FN-2187. I am Finn, and they are someone too. I was taken from my family, I was trained to be a slave, but I am not a mindless clone. I would tell them that they are being controlled and manipulated by the First Order. I would tell them that the First Order does not appreciate the power and intelligence behind the army they treat as expendable. I would tell them that this ship is under attack, and they still have a choice. I would tell them to rise up. Rebel against the officers who control you! Find escape pods and shuttles and escape to the planet’s surface. The Resistance will spare the defector’s lives! You don’t have to go down with the First Order! There is nothing left for you here with captains like Phasma! There are more of us than there will ever be of them and they have trained us to be warriors! That is what I would tell them all.” He finished his speech and smiled.
“And as I said, disobedient scum, who would ever believe you?” He kept his blaster trained on her and moved to the control panel, overriding the emergency switch and opening the blast door.

“They will,” he asserted.

“Finn, no!” Rose screamed. The door opened to stormtroopers with their weapons raised.

Rey lifted her weapon into a defensive stance. “What are you doing!?”

“Kill them,” Phasma commanded the troopers. They moved forward into the room, but trained their weapons on Phasma instead. “No!” she shouted. “Traitors!” The stormtroopers forced her onto her knees. Judicial troopers marched into the room. “He’s a traitor! He’s a liar!” she sneered.

“That’s not what it sounded like to us,” one of the stormtroopers argued. Immediately, Rey understood. She moved forward to the control panel. The main stormtrooper comm override switch has been flipped on. They had heard everything. And Finn had trusted them enough to open the blast doors to them. They removed Phasma’s helmet and lowered her to her knees. The Judicial stormtrooper aimed a blaster at her head.

“No!” Finn shouted, and Phasma’s piercing blue eyes found his. “Execution by blaster is too good for her.”

“May I?” he asked the judicial trooper, who obligingly handed him the laser ax. As the other troopers held her shoulders, he knelt down and whispered something only she could hear. They lowered her to the floor. “Any last words?” he echoed.

“You will always be scum,” she spat.

“Rebel scum,” he smiled and heaved the ax down upon her neck.
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Minor characters shot by blaster

Beheading
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“Ben!” her voice over the comlink startled him. “We did it! Well, Finn did it. He turned the stormtroopers against Phasma. She's dead.”

If Finn had indeed instigated an uprising, it could create the chaos they needed to complete the mission. Hux had been so sure his army would remain loyal. But Finn had done it—succeeding against Phasma, no less. Ben chuckled to himself.

“Way to go, Finn,” he whispered to the room. Multiple weapons and defense systems, as well as the Force Destiny control panels glowed red from the damage his lightsaber had done. The Knights were on their way; he couldn’t leave anything to chance.

He pulled a datachip from the main computer and shoved it beside the other one in his boot. “That's...great, Rey. I need you to press the emergency shutoff; you can release it once you leave. You need to find the defense systems and deactivate the shield generators for the entire fleet. Once you have lowered the shields, contact your general on comms, and they will launch the attack. Then head to the Falcon.”

There was panic in her beautiful voice, and it hurt to realize these were the last moments he had with her. “Is everything okay?” she asked anxiously. “What happened?” He wanted to tell her it didn't matter. He wanted to tell her he loved her and he was sorry. But then she would know, and she would never leave. With practiced control, he hid the resignation in his voice to calm her.

“Hux is here. I had to destroy the systems control panel. It turns out all of my practice destroying other control panels was actually useful.” There was no way to secure the other bridge without one of them staying behind, but he hoped that, with the uprising, the shields would be down long enough for Dameron and his squadron to do enough damage. It required the Resistance to attack sooner than he had hoped, but it likely wouldn't have mattered anyway. If the others triggered the emergency shutdown, the alert would draw attention to the Command Bridge. With the destruction of the system controls, there was no reason for him to stay on the bridge except to serve as a distraction.

Hopefully, it would give the squadron enough time. Hux was as good as dead, the officers would divert their attention to the uprising, the Knights would focus on him. It could be enough to win. An escape was not in the cards, but he would make do with what he had. As he walked across the bridge, Hux slid to the floor, staring at the blade in his chest. Ben stepped over him to reach the
communications control.

"This is Ben Solo," he said into the comms mic, "the bridges have fallen. Coordinate the allied forces across the galaxy. When the shields go down, you know what to do."

"Copy that."

"And General?"

"Yes," answered Poe Dameron.

"Make sure the Millennium Falcon gets out of here before you blow her up. I will stay and help in whatever way I can up here, but make sure Rey gets off this ship."

“You’re staying behind.” It was a statement, not a question. The Resistance general understood what it would take to win. He didn’t argue with him. They both knew he would do the same thing if he was in Ben’s position.

Hux gasped for breath behind him. He could have pitied him, put him out of his misery. But he had warned Hux what he would do if he hurt her. Ben decided to let him suffer. He wanted the man to see how his mistakes culminated in the destruction of the First Order.

Ben watched at the head of the bridge, the large viewport curving around him, as the battle for the galaxy unfolded in front of him. This was the same position he had taken when he watched Hux destroy the Hosnian system. He had argued against the idea of destroying the New Republic. He had wanted to overthrow the Senate and dismantle the New Republic, not kill them all. He thought they would be a better use to control through force, not eliminate completely. The act created more chaos, not order. But his master and Hux ignored him, and he watched and listened as millions of voices were suddenly silenced. He felt every death through the Force. It was the single most painful moment in the Force he had ever experienced. He had helplessly watched from the sidelines as they destroyed it all, and he had done nothing to stop it.

Now his view encompassed the beginning of the destruction of the war machine he’d helped create. He smiled. This view would be the last he would see beyond this ship. It was oddly peaceful and beautiful in its destruction. He ignored the crackling of the lightsaber slowly cutting a hole through the heavy blaster door behind him. He knew the Knights of Ren were waiting for him on the other side. He could feel the weakness returning. His time was up.
It was irony, he supposed, that he had never cared much for his own life; he had even wanted to die, but now he had something to live for. Someone. And all he wanted to do was live for her. There was an impending doom he’d felt returning to the Finalizer, as if he knew how it would end, but he’d still had hope. The sound of plasma melting durasteel behind him reminded him that he wouldn’t be making it off that ship alive. She would hate him, but at least she would be safe. He tried to draw in the strength for one last fight, to hold them off long enough to seal the fate of his empire.

Ben turned, taking in the sickly pallor of his former general. There was something in him that felt the smallest bit of regret that it ended the way it had. Ben’s fate could easily have been similar to the man struggling for breath. Hux had made terrible choices, but his family had failed him as well. He had also been manipulated and molded by Sidious. Unfortunately, he hadn’t been given the chance to see the light. If Ben hadn’t been given that chance, he could have been dying across from the man at the hands of the Resistance.

"You fool, there are seventy-five thousand personnel on this destroyer. Did you think you would just walk off this ship?" the general sneered weakly behind him.

"That was never the plan, Hux," he sighed.
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After the last stormtrooper exited the bridge, Finn flipped the emergency shutdown switch on the control panel.

“Do you think that will work?” Rey asked excitedly. “Do you think all of the stormtroopers will choose to rebel?”

“It’s in their hands now. I think they at least have a chance, which is more than they had before,” Finn replied hopefully. “What’s the plan?”

“We lower the shields, alert the Resistance to begin the attack, then get out of here. If Ben hasn’t made it out of the Command Bridge, I'll go help him there.”

Finn’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “How do we keep the shields lowered if we leave the bridge?”

“There must be a lock or something. We'll figure that out once we lower the shields,” Rose said brightly, wrapping her arms around her fiancé.

“I can do it.” There was a groan in the far corner of the room. One of the officers was still alive. Rey made her way to him, raising her weapon to end his suffering. “Please,” he said, his hands raised. “I want to help.” The Force whispered to listen, to trust him. Blue sat by his side, his soft whimpering pleading with her to have mercy. Did they know each other?

"Ben says that somewhere in here are controls for the defense system. We have to disable the deflector shield generators for all of the ships in the fleet, then contact the Resistance. Where are they?"

“The defensive system controls are over there,” he pointed with red-tinged, trembling fingers. “And the outside comms are there. Please, please don't kill me.”
"I can do this!" Rose shouted. She began to study the network of controls for what they needed in the direction the officer had pointed. Blue joined her, docking with the computer to help her navigate. Rey turned back to the man in question.

“What's your name?” she asked softly.

“Mitaka. Dopheld Mitaka.”

“Mitaka,” she repeated. She had never seen the man before, but there seemed to be a recognition in his eyes. “You must understand why we can't leave you in here alive once we lower the shields.”

“You have to,” he insisted. “The room won't lock from the outside. If you abandon it, another officer could raise the shields again. The system could reset or fail to lower all the remaining shields in the fleet if you try to destroy the panel when you leave. The only way to keep those shields lowered is for someone to press the emergency shut down switch from the inside, then sit here and guard these controls until the fleet is destroyed.” Something Mitaka had said set off a warning alarm in her mind. Something else the Force wanted her to pay attention to. She skimmed his mind and found only the sharp edge of truth.

Finn shook his head. “No way we're leaving an officer of the First Order alone in here.”

“He's telling the truth; I can feel it.” She turned to Mitaka. “If you stay, then you'll die.”

He grinned through crimson-stained lips. “This isn't what I signed up for. What your friend said about the stormtroopers is true for many of the officers, too. They never cared about us, they just used us. I'm dying; better to help burn this all down before I go.” He groaned again as he held his side tightly, a dark, wet spot growing on his uniform under his hand.

“Thank you,” she whispered, squeezing his hand gently before pulling him to a stand. It wasn't until she had stood and helped him cross the room to the Emergency Shut Down switch that she realized the significance of what the officer had said. If the system had been set up as the Mitaka had described, what had been Ben's plan?

Rey reached out across the bond to find Ben. She didn’t sense fear, but she couldn't shake the feeling of dread creeping in the back of her mind.
How is Hux still alive?

She remembered choking him. She remembered the Force blowing them apart. She saw him lying there, twisted unnaturally. She was sure he was dead, and when she’d sensed someone coming, she had chosen to defend herself instead.

*I should have gone back and checked.*

The deep-seated evil of that man terrified her. And now he was locked in the same room with Ben. Something about Ben's change of plan didn't sit right with her. Why did he destroy the control panel without first lowering the shields himself? If he knew that destroying the control panel would reset it, then what had he intended to do? Why didn't he kill Hux? What was he not telling her?

Rey tried to control the fear wavering in her voice as she lifted the commlink. “Ben, we're lowering the shields. Leave now and meet us at the Falcon.”

"I...” His voice sounded pained and her stomach dropped. She knew immediately he had no plan of meeting her at his father’s ship. “I need to stay here and help the Resistance whatever way I can. But it's okay, the Falcon isn't the only way off this ship, there's plenty of emergency shuttles.”

“No, Ben, you're coming with me.”

There was a silence, too long. “I can't, sweetheart.”

“Then I'll stay with you,” she said, though she knew he would find an excuse for that, too. There was something he wasn’t telling her; she could feel it like electricity on her skin.

“No, I've shut down the bridge, you can't get in.” *Does he know then—that the bridge can only be locked from the inside?*

Rey couldn’t control the blooming fear in her voice. “What about Hux?”

“He's dying. There's no one else here with me. Get those shields down and go.” Hux was dying.
The Resistance was coming. The shields would fall. They could escape back to the Falcon. She should have been relieved. They had done it; the First Order would fall. But there was that something else that wouldn’t fade, something she couldn't put a finger on, that intuition that had gotten her through those harsh days on Jakku.

She knelt next to Mitaka, who had slid down the wall she'd propped him against, asking the question that had left her uneasy. “Did Kylo Ren know that the bridges could only be locked down from the inside?”

“Kylo Ren?” He studied her silently for a moment and she wondered what his relationship was to her bondmate. It likely wasn’t a good one, but his face softened with a slight grin when he rasped, “Well, I'd hope so, he was the one who ordered it.”

Terror shuddered through her as she began to understand. Ben had known what Mitaka knew when he devised the plan. If he changed the original plan, then he had wanted to be the one to lower the shields. He had meant for her to destroy the systems on her side. Ben wouldn't have left anything to chance. He wouldn't have abandoned the Command Bridge before the ship was destroyed. That meant that from the beginning...Ben had no intention of trying to escape.

Ben had no intention of leaving at all.

But circumstances had changed. He had no reason to stay on the bridge if the systems were destroyed. Even if he didn’t make it to the Falcon in time, he would meet them like he said he would. Wouldn’t he?

"I found it!" Rose said excitedly. "We have complete control over all of the defense and weapons systems of the entire fleet. We can disable their shields, but also their hyperdrive, tractor beam, turbolasers, and ion cannons. We can leave them all completely defenseless."

"Do it!" Rey cried through tears. Finn studied her emotional response carefully. He cocked his head slightly, giving her a questioning look.

"I need to get to Ben," she heaved in panic. The room was spinning around her. The dread she had shaken away, the dread she had felt seeing the goodbye in his eyes, had returned in full force. She wouldn't leave him.

"No, we need you here. We need to contact the Resistance to initiate the attack and get off this
destroyer before they blow it up, Rey," Finn reasoned. “That is what Ben wants.”

"No, I'm not leaving this ship without Ben," Rey repeated obstinately. Ben may not have believed her, but Finn would. Finn would help her, because Finn understood what it felt like to fight for someone he loved.

Rey's eyes pleaded with his, but he looked away painfully. She stepped forward to reach for him, shake him, beg him to do the right thing. The last thing she heard was a soft click. The last thing she saw was a bright blue light before her world faded to darkness. Finn lowered his blaster as she crumpled at his feet, unconscious. "I was afraid you would say that," he whispered. "I'm sorry, Rey." He moved her unconscious body to a more comfortable position.

"What are you doing?" Rose cried.

"I made Ben a promise. We're getting her on the *Falcon.*" He scooped her into his arms and headed to the door next to Mitaka.

“Thank you,” Rose whispered to the officer as she helped him to his feet, “you're giving your life to help save the galaxy. We will never forget what you've done for us all.”

Mitaka smiled wanly. “I'm no hero, I'm dying. The man on that comlink needs my help. I don't know how you managed this, but he's setting us all free in one way or another. You do know... he's not making it off the other bridge, either, don't you?”

Rose turned to her fiancé, eyes wide in horror. “Yes,” Finn answered without returning her stare.

Mitaka nodded toward Rey. “She doesn't.”

“She will.”

“Thank her, for sparing my life. I'll get the chance to tell my wife and son goodbye before I die.” The man lifted a personal comlink, his smile grave. Finn looked at the man he had shot, a man who had once been his superior, a man he had grouped into the entire First Order as "evil." But in the end, he was just a man who made terrible choices. He had a family and a job. Finn didn't know what he had done during his time serving the Order, but he knew the man still had good in him. He just happened to be fighting on the opposite side of the war, as Finn might have been had fate been
crueler, had he not had the chance to make one different choice.

Maybe it was all a lot more complicated than he had ever considered. “And tell her that the man on the other bridge died doing something we all wished we were brave enough to do.” His eyes shifted to Finn. “Like you were brave enough to do. I remember you—your escape off Jakku with the droid on that freighter. And a girl. Kylo Ren had been fixated on the girl.” His gaze trailed down to stare at Rey, his eyes knowing. He shook his head with a soft huff. “That was the beginning of the end, I think. It’s only fitting that the trooper who started it all is here at the end.” His knees wobbled as he began to weaken. “Go. Good luck.”

They nodded and left the officer behind to face his fate, the blast door slamming shut behind them.
Discussion of death
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See the end of the chapter for more notes
“Poe?” a voice asked over the comms. It wasn’t Ben Solo.

“Finn, buddy, is that you?”

“Poe!” Finn yelled, matching his enthusiasm. “We did it! The shields are down...the weapons systems...the hyperdrive... everything! They’re sitting ducks! We’re on our way to the Millennium Falcon.”

Poe reined in his laughter as he ensured that he had reason to celebrate. “Do you have Rey with you?”

“Yes!”

Poe laughed in relief. After everything they had been through, it was almost over. Ben Solo did what he said he would. Finn was right; the First Order fleet were sitting ducks, and with the Alliance fleet kept at a safe distance from the destroyer’s long-range ion cannons, they had maintained the firepower required to launch a massive assault. The First Order would fall. Somewhere inside that destroyer, his friends were escaping. Everything else could wait until after the war.

“You heard the man,” he shouted in excitement over the comms, “Contact the allied forces across the galaxy. It’s time. Our friends are still on that ship, so aim to debilitate, not destroy. Let’s take our galaxy back.”

Beebee-Ate screeched behind him as he pushed the throttle forward and rocketed toward the Finalizer. He would target surface cannons and anti-aircraft weapons until the Millennium Falcon made it safely out of that hangar. Even though Finn said the defenses were down, the first shot was the most terrifying. Their fates hung in the balance. Poe sucked in a breath as he released the missile. The most beautiful sight in the galaxy was when the first explosion lit up the darkness.
Chapter End Notes

Explosions
Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes
Rey awoke to a throbbing headache. She was dizzy, and she could not remember how she had lost consciousness. She heard Finn's voice and realized he was carrying her. “Take them down!” he was shouting. When he realized she was awake, he set her down in favor of using his blaster.

“What happened?” she asked groggily. He only grasped Rey’s hand and dragged her along after him. It was only as her mind cleared that she understood how dire their situation had become. The destroyer had erupted into anarchy. The stormtroopers were rebelling. The officers had taken position on upper floors, aiming at the stormtroopers below, regardless of whether they had joined the rebellion. Troopers were falling around them at an alarming rate as the officers made deadly use of their elevated position. There was nowhere to hide. She thought for a moment that the officers would quell the rebellion before they could all escape. But her best friend continued to shout orders, continued to inspire hope, and the others rallied around him like a true leader. The indiscriminate firing from above only served to encourage more troopers to join forces against the Order.

Whether or not the rebellion was working, it wasn’t much of an ‘order’ anymore.

The scene around them was pandemonium. Blasterfire surrounded them, striking the tiles around their feet. Finn cried out when one grazed his arm, but he immediately lifted it again to continue firing. Screams filled the air, blood stained the floors. His injury inspired Rey to use the Force to the best to her abilities in her weakened state, creating as large of a shield as she could to protect them from the blaster bolts. They stumbled over the dying and dead. Rose stopped to help pull whoever was capable of standing to their feet. Blue was glued to Finn’s side, projecting a holomap of the ship onto the floor in front of them to guide the way.

The blasterfire that had been raining from above, vibrating against her Force shield suddenly eased. Rey glanced up as Finn pulled her along in her dizzied state. Tiny black objects began to fall from the upper levels. It wasn’t until they came crashing down to the surface with a sickening thud that Rey realized it was the officers. The troopers were overwhelming them both in numbers and strategy. They had found them, and were overthrowing them in the most literal of ways. The troopers were trained to be weapons of war, and now they had turned on the people who had controlled them.

Rey turned her focus from above, to the path before them. A line of officers, droids and deadly weapons was organized to create a barrier between the rebellion and the Main Hangar. At Finn’s command, a group of stormtroopers surged forward, easily outnumbering the officers and droids that stood to stop them. Many of the troopers fell, but there were simply too many for the officers to contain. The troopers had nothing to lose and that was impossible to defeat.
Some officers held the line. Most fled. When a military was run by fear, they had no reason to die for the cause. As they entered the hangar, the troopers broke off to escape onto the fighters and shuttles. As Finn pulled her to the left, Rey realized the *Millennium Falcon* was in front of them. Something inside her screamed not to board that ship. It was only then that she tried to piece together how she had gotten there, and she remembered the events on the bridge. Once they reached the boarding ramp, Rey started to fight back. Finn stopped and tried to reason with her as Rose boarded with Blue.

"Let go! You shot me!" she screamed.

"Rey... We did it. The entire fleet is disabled. We sent a message to the Resistance and left Mitaka on the bridge. We did it. The attack is underway. Now it's time to get out of here!" he reasoned with her, his hands grasping each of her shoulders tightly to prevent her escape.

Rey shook her head vehemently. "No! Ben is still here!"

Finn’s eyes flashed with fear. "He's leaving on an escape pod! He's meeting us out there, okay?" He grabbed Rey's hand and tried to pull her onboard. She stood unwavering.

“No, I’m not leaving him! What about the other bridge, he said he couldn't leave!"

"No, no, no, he didn't know about Mitaka's help. Ben took care of it, destroyed what he needed to, and disabled the Command Bridge," he assured Rey. “He said he had some personal effects to grab, and he's going to find an escape pod and meet us out there. But if you want to be out there to pick him up, we have to leave now!" Rey loved her best friend, but she felt his lie in the Force. She pulled away from him.

*Ben, where are you?*

She closed her eyes to find him in the Force, but Finn interrupted her by grabbing her hand. He dragged her toward the ship.

"Let go of my hand," she cried, struggling backward on the boarding ramp. “I'm not leaving him!” A whirlwind of emotions was building inside her. She could feel the Force buzzing around her. She was fearful of what she might accidentally do to her friend if her emotions escalated to a breaking point.
“Rey, get on the ship,” a deep, calm voice said behind her. Finn released her hand and she turned. Ben stood, his chest heaving, half his face covered in a web of black, at the bottom of the loading ramp. A scar split his face, toxin twisted through his veins, he was still wearing his too-small clothes, and their bond hummed between them. It’s him. She covered the distance between them in seconds, wrapping her arms around his large frame.

“I was so scared, Ben, I thought I would never see you again,” she cried into his shoulder. He winced and she felt a distant spark of pain. She could feel him in the bond again, which made her more fearful than relieved. Did that mean the toxin had reached a more dire stage? She slid her hand down his back until her fingers met a wet, sticky substance. She pulled her hand away.

Blood.

“You’re hurt!”

“Nothing too bad. You should see Hux,” he smiled, wrapping his arm around her. She knew Kylo was far from fine. The toxin had progressed, there were still wounds from the crash to his head and chest, and now he had a wound to his back. The man needed a medbay. “Come on, we have to get you off this destroyer,” he said, and she could agree more. He moved her up the boarding ramp and onto the Millennium Falcon. His eyes met Finn’s and he nodded. Finn worked to close the airlock doors, and then jogged to the cockpit to prepare the ship for takeoff. She felt relief flood through her as the doors closed.

We’re all safe.

“I thought you were taking an escape pod?” she remembered. His eyes narrowed, searching hers.

“Change of plan,” he answered carefully.

“Well, thank the Force, because we have to get you to a medbay,” she said, pointing to the black toxin twisting through his veins.

“Once it’s a safe distance from the destroyer, you can bring this piece of junk to any of the allied ships with a medbay you desire,” he said.
Ben took her arm and guided her to the cockpit. He was silent as they walked, lost to his thoughts. *Is he in pain? Is he trying to hide it from me? How bad is his injury? He’s hiding something, I can feel it.* She grabbed his arm to stop him as they entered the cockpit. She gasped as she felt a spark from the leftover energy from the stun.

Finn cleared his throat behind her, but he was staring knowingly at Ben when they turned. It was almost as if they had a bond of their own, because Ben nodded in acknowledgment without a word being spoken between them.

“Rey?”

“Yes?” Her stomach twisted in concern as she studied his eyes. He pressed his lips together, swallowing his emotions, preparing himself for... something. “What’s wrong?”

“No… I...” he sighed deeply, finding the resolve. His hand came up to smooth the hair from her face. His gaze traced over her features as if he were committing every last freckle to memory. “Rey, I love you, more than anything.” She smiled. His eyes looked almost sorrowful, but the hazy fog in her mind was making everything feel dire. Everything was fine. They were all escaping off the destroyer. They had won.

She grabbed his hand, and was reminded of how cold he was. Holding his hand only increased the unease that was becoming difficult to ignore, renewing her anxiousness to get him to a medbay. “Ben, come on. We have all the time in the galaxy now; we have to get you out of here.”

“Rey,” he said, stopping her before she turned. “Just remember that, okay? No matter what happens.”

“I love you too,” she answered with a nervous smile. He returned her smile before pulling her into him, holding her as if he never wanted to let her go. A vibrating energy moved through the bond between them. It was soothing to her still numb and lightheaded mind. When he pulled away, his eyes were bright and glossy. She studied him for a moment as he wavered on his feet before moving for the cockpit. “We can talk about everything after we get you to a medbay,” she said over her shoulder.

“You’re okay to pilot?” he asked behind her as she flipped the necessary switches for take-off. Rey turned to nod reassuringly. His eyes were not focused on her, however. He held Finn’s gaze as he entered the cockpit. “Finn, I need you to co-pilot.” His stare was unwavering, another conversation passing between them. “Get this ship away from here, no matter what.”
“What about you?” The fear hadn’t dissolved, even with his presence in the room with her. There was an uneasiness festering in her mind that she could not place.

*Force, why did Finn have to stun me?*

“Someone has to man the turret,” he smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He lingered for a moment, his soft eyes staring passionately into hers. He was looking at her with an emotion she had yearned for her entire life – an emotion she had seen in his eyes for as long as she could remember, but had only realized what it meant recently – deep, profound love. Her muddled mind, however, convinced her there was something rueful in them.

*I don’t understand, why do your eyes still look like they’re saying goodbye? What’s wrong?*

“Let’s go,” she said uneasily. “We need to get you to a medbay.” She finished the launch sequence as Finn took the seat next to her. She listened for the sound of Ben’s boots receding from the cockpit, but he just stood there, watching her. She hastily guided Finn through the final steps for takeoff. Her emotions were still a hurricane raging inside her belly, her mind still spinning, but at least the Force had quieted around her. The air felt lighter, but the pressure in her chest was suffocating.

*I’ll feel better after we get out of here, and get Ben some help.*

She heard movement behind her and then Rose spoke. “I can assist if you need my help. I’m not the best pilot but I can make do.” Rey turned to see Rose smiling at her. Ben was gone.

*Strange, I never heard him leave.*

“Can you fire the laser cannons? You could relieve Ben on the turret, I think he’s more hurt than he lets on,” she replied. She didn’t say that she would much rather have him up in the cockpit where she could keep an eye on him.

Confusion clouded Rose’s features. “Ben’s here? I didn’t see him.” She turned to Finn, whose eyes were wide and silencing. Trepidation crept under Rey’s skin.
That’s impossible. She should have passed him in the corridor.

Chapter End Notes

Violence
Minor character death
Threat of violence
Major character threatens violence against another major character
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Ben took one last lingering look at Rey as she busily prepared the Falcon for departure. The last thing he wanted to do was to hurt her, but he knew that it would be the last thing he did in his life. He couldn't suppress the impending dread that his final moments were slipping away through his fingers like sand. He knew it would be the last time he saw her, and he didn't want the moment to end. A tear cut down his cheek as he closed his eyes.

When he opened them, the connection had closed, and he stood before the blaster door of the
Command Bridge again. He waited for the lightsaber beyond to finish its work, cutting through the reinforced door. Hux’s labored breathing slowly weakened behind him. Though he sensed the fading energy of his former general in the Force, his wound ached sharply in reminder not to turn his back on the man again. Ben knew Rey had feared its lethality, but when he inevitably fell, it wouldn’t be from that wound. The dagger had not done the damage Hux had hoped, but it had inflicted it in return. By trying to kill Ben, Hux had sealed his own fate.

“I may die here today, but I have left...my mark on this galaxy, Ren,” Hux hissed, delivering his speech through wheezing gasps. “Just as the debris of what once was Alderaan stands as a monument to the strength of the Empire, for millennia to come the remnants of what was once the capital of the New Republic will serve as a testament to the power of the First Order. They will remember the name Armitage Hux, make no mistake about that. It was my genius behind the First Order and mine alone. I built and commanded our dominant armies. I advanced our technological prowess. I destroyed the weak and stagnant New Republic. And soon, when the Knights defeat you, I will have eliminated every last master of the Force. My name will be apotheosized in history as the most influential man of our era.” His chest seized from the exertion. “No one will remember the fallen Kylo Ren.”

“She will,” Ben whispered to himself. “And if there is an eternity after this, so will you.”

“Go to Hell, Ren.”

“See you there, Hux.”

The lightsaber had finished its jagged arc through the heavy door. As the adrenaline pumped into his system, the pain numbed. He closed his eyes and cleared his mind. He could feel the Force flowing through his senses.

_Forgive me, Rey. One day you'll understand. I had to do this._

He activated his lightsaber and kicked the intersected piece of door outward. He needed the element of surprise. Rushing through the door opening, he slid through the Knights waiting for him. No longer cornered, and strategically behind them, he began swinging.

He noticed there were only four. Two were missing, Dorsk and Jacen. Fear crawled up his spine as he considered the thought that Jacen went looking for Rey. No, _he’s here, somewhere_. Jacen wouldn’t have left him alive; he knew he was close. They overwhelmed him with strikes that he was forced to block and parry rather than strike out offensively. Jaina and Kyp attempted to flank him, and he jumped back.
He backed onto an elevated walkway, making it more difficult for the other Knights to surround him. The strength of the Force suppressive cage was minimal. Only the bases were secured under the entrance and exit of the elevated walkway, and the energy was stretched between a much larger surface area than the typical cage. But it was enough for them to feel it. Small manipulations easily moved through the barrier, but stronger offensive strikes would be weakened. He hoped it would discourage their use of the Force against him. Corran and Rayf followed him onto the skyway while the other two sprinted to the left, looking for a way around behind him. He knew if they surrounded him, then the battle would be over. He could feel the weakness draining his energy by the second. His knee faltered and he nearly collapsed. “Rayf, Corran, it’s me! It’s Ben. Stop! Please!”

If he hadn’t already been backstepping, Rayf’s weapon would have impaled him through the chest.

*I have to end this. I won’t be able to stand much longer.*

He blocked a strike with his weapon as he pounded on his chest wounds with the other arm, searching desperately for anything to physically ground him. Darkness flooded through his body, devouring the pain, supplying him with much-needed strength. He knew it wouldn't last long. He remembered how quickly his body had given out on Starkiller.

Ben made a wide sweep with his lightsaber, forcing Rayf to jump back. He carried the momentum around and brought his weapon over his head and down upon the other Knight. The force of the strike sent Rayf backward into Corran, knocking him over. With only one standing adversary, Ben took advantage of the change of odds.

He back stepped quickly, letting Rayf charge him. He moved his lightsaber high to strike down upon the Knight, who raised his weapon to block. Rayf expected a saber clash, but Ben pulled it and spun to the right at the last second, letting Rayf’s momentum carry him forward. Ben quickly impaled the Knight through his back as he fell.

*I’m sorry.*

Ben reminded himself that these men weren’t the men he once knew. Sidious had molded them into weapons, and they would all die on this ship whether he fought them or not. This way, he ensured the First Order fell. It didn’t eliminate the pain he felt at killing his former friend, but he used the anger he felt toward Sidious to pull himself deeper into darkness. Pivoting, he blocked the immediate strike from Corran behind him. He was caught off balance by the strike and fell backward. The skyway rattled underneath him as he fell onto his back. Ben barely blocked another strike from the floor, their blades clashing inches from his face. He tried to push back against it, but
his arms trembled in exhaustion.

Corran recognized his weakness and moved in to apply more leverage to his saber. Ben's lightsaber sank down farther; he could feel the heat of the lateral vent on his injured shoulder. The skyway vibrated under his back as the other two Knights closed in from the other end. He kicked out and caught Corran in the knee, knocking him back.

Ben made a large sweeping slash around to give himself enough space from the approaching Knights behind him to stand. He positioned his body sideways, preparing to defend himself from a battle on both sides. He crouched over to protect himself best he could, but three against one in close quarters would have been difficult even at full strength. With the odds stacked against him and his strength swiftly fading, he would need a miracle to defeat them. As if in answer, he entire destroyer shuddered from an explosion.

He smiled.

The fall of the First Order had begun.
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Character death

Lightsaber battle
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“Where is Ben?” Rey stammered. As the haze over her mind cleared, she trusted the instinct inside her that begged her to run. She sprinted out of the cockpit before her friends could stop her. “Ben!” The cadence of her pulse matched the echo of her boots on the walkway as she sprinted toward the dorsal turret. “Ben!” she screamed.

*Why isn’t he answering?*

She slid down the ladder to the turret, expecting to find Ben bleeding out on the floor. It was empty. Dread shivered up her back.

“Ben!” she cried, desperately searching the ship for him. Her friends were shouting for her, but she ignored them. She passed the room where – only hours before – she had helplessly watched through the bond as Ben was slowly dying. Medical wrappers and injectors littered the floor. His tunic lay tattered in a ball in the corner.

Her entire world had changed since landing on Ilum. Ben has gone from the most powerful man in the galaxy, to laying on his deathbed, to fighting to end the First Order. Now he had a poison coursing through his veins, and was bleeding from wounds of unknown severity. The worst part was she had no idea where he was. He couldn’t have gotten off the *Falcon*, the airlock never reopened. She couldn’t shake the fear that something terrible had happened to him. She closed her eyes, searching the Force for his presence on the ship. She gasped as terror stole her breath.

*He’s not here.*

Finn and Rose were running around the corner as she opened the airlock door. As the door lowered, Finn grabbed her arm forcefully.

“No!” he shouted. “You’re not leaving, Rey!”

In her anger, she shoved him backward with the Force. He slammed into the wall behind him, his eyes wide in shock. “Truth, now!” she demanded. “Where is Ben?”
His eyes glowed in fear. “Close the hatch, and I’ll tell you,” he insisted, stepping toward her cautiously.

“No! Tell me now!” she screamed. In a blink, Finn had rushed toward her, wrapping his arms around her waist. Rey had never fought Finn before, never had a reason to, but she should have known he was strong. He easily dragged her back toward the cockpit as she fought against him. “Let me go!”

Blue had heard the commotion and began pleading with Finn to release her. Rey’s friend did not relent, however. He was determined to keep her on that ship. Rose, who had been fearfully watching the events unfold in front of her, screamed when Rey summoned her lightsaber and ignited it. Finn released her in fear. “Where is he!” Rey demanded through tears. She pointed the weapon at him threateningly. He raised his hands.

“I don’t know,” he shook his head. “He appeared out of nowhere on the boarding ramp. He must have disappeared the same way. He only wanted to make sure you came with us, Rey.”

*He was never here. He used the bond.*

Finn stepped toward her guardedly, forcing her to disengage the lightsaber. If she ran, she knew he would chase after her. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close to him, trembling in fear. She shivered against the cold inhumanity of white armor, which he still had not taken off.

“Launch procedures are complete, can you lift off and fly this thing by yourself?” She asked Rose, whose hand was still clasped over her mouth.

“Well, yes, but...”

That was all Rey needed.

*Please forgive me.*

Rey reached into the Force, searching for the knowledge she knew Ben had, accessing his strengths through the bond as she had done before. She raised her hand to Finn’s temple and released her energy into his head. *Sleep, my friend.* Finn made no sound as he crumpled to the floor. Rose gasped.
“He’s sleeping,” Rey assured her. “Get as far away from this destroyer as you can. I’ll try to get out on an escape craft. I’ll send you coordinates. But I’m not leaving this place without Ben.”

Rose made no move to stop her as she sprinted away from the *Falcon* and into the chaos of the hangar. There were stormtrooper running in every direction. Alarms were blaring around her. A large explosion knocked her sideways.

*Where are you?*

She reached out into the Force as she ran, searching for Ben. She gasped when she found him on a skyway near the bridge. He was fighting the Knights of Ren. Alone. He was surrounded by them and she could feel his strength dwindling. He wasn’t going to make it, he needed help.

*He's not going to make it. He needs help.*

She dodged around a sea of stormtroopers as she made her way to the Command Bridge. Everything about the scene surrounding her felt wrong, unnerving ... but dreadfully familiar.

*I'm coming, Ben! I promised that I wouldn't leave you on this ship and I intend to keep that promise.*

Explosions rocked the destroyer around her. Alarms echoed and people were shouting in the chaos. She could hear none of it. All she could hear was the war cry drumming of her heart as she raced to battle.
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Ben was exhausted. With strikes from both directions, he was wasting energy blocking and creating more space between them. He knew with one Knight constantly at his back, the next mistake would likely be fatal. He was simply too weak to defend himself much longer.

He had to make a sacrifice to eliminate one of the fronts. He felt Corran swing his weapon high to strike it down from above, and Kyp stabbed forward with the intent to impale him, but the angle suggested the hit would not be center mass.

Ben risked it.

Instead of blocking high against the strike coming down from above, then attempting to push off and deflect the strike from behind him, he let the one behind him come. He flipped his grip on the lightsaber so that the blade pointed behind him. Before Corran could pull his downward strike, Ben swung his arm across his body, bisecting Corran’s unprotected abdomen. He immediately felt a searing jolt as Kyp’s blade from behind him made contact.

"No!"

He heard a scream echo across the skyway. He had twisted his body for the strike, so the saber had only stabbed him in the far-right side. He cried out in pain and swung his arm back to the left as he turned to block another attack. Slashing wide, the others jumped back, and he gave himself space to take stock of the situation. As he quickly glanced around Kyp in search of the owner of the voice, another explosion rocked the ship.

Jaina had turned and was advancing upon a figure that stood at the other end of the skyway. A figure holding a purple saberstaff. His heart sank.

_Rey! How is she here? She was safe on the Falcon! She should be off this destroyer by now!_ He snapped from his thoughts when he was forced to hastily deflect a strike by Kyp. Knocked off balance, he stumbled backward.
Chapter End Notes

Violence

lightsaber battle
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Rey could see them. Ben was caught between three Knights, two in front and one behind. They were moving swiftly and unforgivingly; all he could do was deflect their advances. He was stumbling, swinging wildly as he had done at the end on Starkiller. She knew he couldn’t last much longer against the three of them. The back of his red shirt was stained with a darker, deeper shadow. It glistened in the light.

_Blood._

She ran down the elevated walkway as fast as she could, activating her lightsaber.

_No!_” Rey screamed as she watched one of the Knights closest to her strike forward and stab Ben. The second Knight heard her scream and turned. She recognized the armor. _Jaina._ The Knight began advancing toward her down the skyway, so Rey charged her. Jaina swung with velocity as she approached, and the strike burned her shoulder. Rey tried to Force push her away but it was weakened somehow. The Force drove the woman a step back, but it was ineffective in comparison to its normal capacity. She tried again with the same weakened result. What was happening?

Jaina began a quick succession of strikes that knocked her off balance. Rey was confident, but it was obvious that the Knight had extensive training. Their sabers clashed. She noticed in front of her that Ben had switched positions and was now closer to the center of the skyway—closer to her. If she could fight her way to him, they would have an advantage.

She advanced toward Jaina, feinting to her left side before rolling toward her right. As she spun, she forced Jaina to block as she moved past her. Rey had achieved what she wanted. She was closer to the inside of the skyway. Keeping Jaina in her sights, she rushed backward until she reached Ben.

His relief at having her at his back flowed through the bond. They stood back to back, blocking and striking in unison as if they had choreographed an intricate dance and only they knew the melody. Lightsabers clashed, and both were forced back into each other. The last time they were back to back, he had supported her as she had fallen back against him for leverage. This time, she supported him as he swayed with weakness. It was them against the universe, but there was no one else she would rather be fighting with. The feeling of safety from his presence wrapped around her and brought her confidence to defeat Jaina.
Rey feigned striking high and rolled the saber with her wrist, reversing her grip. She slashed lower, and Jaina was barely able to block her. She heard the clashing of lightsabers and Ben's uneven breathing behind her. Another explosion rocked the ship, and she realized there was a large fire developing below them. If they wanted a chance to make it off the ship, they needed to end the fight.

She swung her lightsaber wildly as she tried to break through Jaina’s defenses. The Knight’s repertoire of advanced skills made breaking through those defenses nearly impossible. Jaina knew exactly which way to deflect or parry to send her off balance or nearly lead her into a fatal mistake. Rey swung her saber down upon her, which she easily blocked, and the Knight kicked her backward.

Rey dropped her lightsaber as she fell. She scrambled backward to escape from the Knight. She heard the crackling of clashing lightsabers behind her and knew Ben wouldn't be able to get to her. She realized her saber was behind Jaina and likely wouldn't get to her hand in time to block the incoming strike. Without hesitation, Jaina swung her lightsaber down to finish her off.

Weaponless, Rey did the only thing she could do. She summoned her lightsaber. Her connection to it was weaker than before, but it still responded to the call from her soul. Mid-air, as Ben had done in the throne room, she ignited it with the Force. The weapon burst to life, and one of the lightsaber’s dual blades pierced through Jaina’s back into her abdomen. The Knight gasped in surprise as she dropped to her knees. Rey pulled her weapon from Jaina’s back without a drop of remorse as darkness howled in her veins.
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Lightsaber battle
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Ben panicked. He could hear Rey struggling. He sensed her fear. As Ben teetered on the edge of the skyway, Kyp tried to shove him over when their lightsabers clashed. Ben saw Rey fall, stumbling backward without her weapon. He felt powerless; he couldn’t help her. Even if he sacrificed himself to get his weapon to her, she wouldn’t have time. She had to use the Force.

*The Force, Rey!* 

Relief shuddered through his body as Rey summoned her lightsaber. Ben released his ragged breath as she impaled Jaina. She triumphantly pulled the weapon from the back of the fallen Knight and turned to him. Something about it reminded him of the throne room, and he had an idea.

Rey jumped in surprise when Ben summoned her lightsaber. He activated it and used it to gain enough leverage to push Kyp away, barely maintaining enough balance to remain on the walkway. Ben stood, gasping for air, with both lightsabers in front of him. He swung them out wide as he pivoted, barely missing Kyp’s chest. The blades came down upon him crossed, ready to slash through the Knight’s body. Kyp blocked the best he could, but his struggle renewed a strength in Ben. He advanced, slashing at Kyp with both blades, forcing him to retreat. He looked sure to quickly end the fight, but his leg gave out, and he collapsed down on one knee.

"Ben!" he heard Rey scream behind him. Kyp took advantage of his weakness and brought his lightsaber down on to the crossed purple and red lightsabers. Ben was exhausted. He shook as he fought to stand and gain leverage, the blades inches from his face. The lightsabers crackled and sparked as both men pushed into them.

Kyp was stronger, but Ben had the advantage—he had two lightsabers. *Two lightsabers.* Ben remembered the training. As Kyp pushed his lightsaber down against the dual sabers, Ben quickly deactivated and activated Rey’s lightsaber. Kyp was left defenseless as it continued on its forward path. It came down at the base of the Knight’s neck and sliced through him. Kyp fell back off the edge of the skyway. Ben collapsed onto both knees, deactivating the lightsabers.

Ben sucked in a breath as Rey ran to him. Her body rocked with relieved sobs as she wrapped her arms around him. He held onto her as another wave of weakness washed over him. Though he doubted that he could walk, he would try to make it, for her, so they could get on an escape craft. His breathing slowed as he held her while she sobbed into his hair.
"It's over," she sighed. His face was pressed into the warmth of her abdomen, her soothing scent enveloping him. It reminded him of damp soil on Chandrila after a light rain. He suppressed a sob, grasping onto her desperately. The smoke was rising around them.

You shouldn’t be here.

“Why did you come back?” His voice was weaker than he had intended. She dropped to her knees, cupping his face in her hands. Staring softly into his eyes, she smiled.

“Because I love you,” she beamed, as if they were the most natural words in the galaxy to say. “Ben, it’s over, we did it, we can be together now.”

"No!" a voice howled behind them.

Jacen.

“Jaina!”

Jacen dropped to his knees beside the body of his sister, guttural whimpers ripped from his throat as he smoothed the hair from her face. At some point between their charge of the bridge and his reappearance on the skywalk, he had shed the helmet and armor, an exchange of protection for agility. He had clearly not been standing in the shadows and observing; there was blood on his tunic. Where had he been while the other Knights fell? Ben forced himself to stand, handing Rey her lightsaber.

“You took her from me!” Jacen’s eyes were wild with rage. “I will make you suffer, Kylo Ren, if it’s the last thing I do.”

“I know,” Ben said simply. It was true, he had seen the vision. The events of this confrontation had all been laid out for him; this was where he fell.

Jacen faltered at his admission, but the wrath came easily as he looked back at his sister. “This is what happens when you obey the Jedi! You take lives that don’t belong to you!”
“Do you think we did any different under Snoke?”

Jacen didn’t answer. He screamed a tormented cry into the abyss as he held his sister to him. When he spoke again, his whisper was cold and even. “When he returns, he’ll bring her back to me. We’ll command the Dark Army together. And you’ll die, Jedi.”

“You don’t have to do this, Jacen!” Rey begged. “I saw Ben’s memories. I saw how close you were in Jedi training. I saw what Luke did. I saw what happened to Dev! I saw how Snoke turned you against each other! I saw all of it! It’s not too late! The war is over. The First Order has fallen. Snoke is gone. Luke is gone. You can come with us. Start over. Jacen, I know somewhere deep down you still have light left in you.”

Jacen stared at Ben for a moment, and a small smile twitched on his lip. “I…I do…. I feel the pull to the light. Now that Snoke is gone, I feel like the curse is broken. I want to be good. I want to start over. I am so ashamed of what I have become. I’m just scared. Rey, tell me what to do to be the boy I once was. Is it too late to save my soul?” Jacen lowered his lightsaber and dropped his head. Rey walked to him with confidence and hope. Ben reached for her, to stop her, but she persisted, wrenching her arm from his grasp. He was too weak to hold onto her.

“You can’t save him, Rey. This won’t go the way you hope. Ben willed the thought to her.

“Just put down the lightsaber, Jacen, and we can all walk off this ship together. You don’t have to renounce the darkness. All you have to do is choose to be the true Jacen that is still hidden inside. Ben and I can help you.” She smiled supportively. She attempted to hide her contempt for the man in front of her, but Ben knew she was reaching out to Jacen for him. Just as he had tried to free her from her past by revealing who her parents were, Rey was trying to free him from the ghosts of his past by restoring one of the most important bonds in his former life. Rey was forever hopeful, which was a blessing and a curse. It was true, she had helped him save himself when no one else believed in him, but Ben knew some people just couldn’t be saved.

Rey, please, you don’t have to do this. There is no light left in him.

As Rey stepped closer, she reached out for Jacen’s lightsaber. Jacen surprised them both by deactivating the weapon, offering the hilt to her submissively. His eyes were downcast, his breathing ragged. She closed her fingers around the weapon. As she edged closer, a smirk twitched across his lips.

“No… I don’t think so.”
Rey’s voice was still filled with such hope as she spoke. “Jacen?”

He snapped his hand closed around hers, using her fingers to reactivate the plasma blade. In one swift motion, he had spun her around, her back pressed against his strong body. With his hand over hers, they held the lightsaber to her throat.

“Stop!” Ben shouted, without hesitation or consideration of the consequences, “I’ll drop my lightsaber. I’ll give up. Just let her go.” Ben could see the darkness in Jacen’s eyes. He knew Jacen was already lost. He held his hands up, the weapon hanging non-threateningly in his fingers.

_Ben, no!_ echoed in his mind.

Blood lust flashed across Jacen’s eyes. Ben recognized it all too well. “Drop it, Kylo!” Jacen disengaged the lightsaber, replacing it with his arm around Rey’s throat instead. Ben released the lightsaber from his grasp, letting it clatter to the skywalk.

"It's Ben Solo."

"Kylo...Ben...call yourself whatever you want; I'll still destroy you," Jacen promised.

"And I won't fight you, Jacen. You have what you want. Let her go," Ben said placatingly, his hands raised non-threateningly. “Please.” The dream from the night Rey had first lain in his arms replayed in his mind. The Force had warned him how this would end. He accepted it. He _deserved_ it.

"If you won't fight, then you will die," Jacen sneered. “You may have been like my brother, but you took my sister from me. I will make you suffer, Kylo.”

“Jacen, you don’t have to do this,” Rey begged.

_No, but he will. I saw it._
There was a spike of panic across the bond. She had heard him.

“That’s not my name!” Jacen screamed. Rey used his distraction to her advantage. She called the lightsaber from her hip to her hand and pivoted. In one swift move, she had thrust the blade into his chest. Ben felt a split-second of remorse-streaked relief. But then time slowed, as it always had in consequential moments. The warning in the energy around them sent a terror through him more paralyzing than the strongest Force-hold. The twitch of an ignition switch was a movement almost undetectable in the Force, but it tore his soul open like an explosion. Before he could scream, or reach for the weapon, or jump between them, the red plasma illuminated the darkness. Rey cried out as the blade pierced through her.

"No!" A broken, harrowed howl was dragged from Ben's chest as he collapsed to his knees. His entire world tilted sideways. He pushed himself up, stumbling to her side as the blades disappeared into their respective chambers. Rey wavered on her feet for a moment, before she fell into his waiting arms. There were cries of agony surrounding them, and it took him a moment to realize they were his, the darkness nearly suffocating in its intensity. He could feel the cold hatred pumping through his veins with every heartbeat, with every extra breath he was not destined to take.

Flashes of a night in the rain, another loved one in his arms, replayed tormentingly in his mind. He wasn’t naïve this time, but he was still in denial, because this was not how it was meant to end. He was supposed to be the one whose breath was labored, he was supposed to be the one whose knees were buckling, he was supposed to be the one whose lips were unnaturally pale. He was supposed to be the one punished for his sins. The Force had shown him his destiny.

He was the one supposed to fall.

Not her.

Never her.

Jacen dropped to his knees beside him. “You were right, watching the life drain...this was always my weakness,” he murmured between gasps. The darkness was gone from his eyes, the darkness had abandoned him in his final moments. He was nothing more than the boy Ben had met at the Jedi temple.

“Why?” Ben groaned through clenched teeth, refusing to take his eyes off Rey's reposed face. “Why her, Jace? Why not me? I was the one with too much darkness; it was my actions that led to Dev’s death. I doomed us all by joining Snoke. It was my fault. Blame me! End my miserable life!
Why did you do this? You were my brother. Why would you take her?"

“You took Jaina from me.” There was no malice in his voice as exhaustion systematically shut down his body. Ben realized that his dream had come true. Jacen had gone for his heart—just not in the way he’d expected. “I told you I would make you suffer, so I took the person who matters the most to you. But I don't know why we got here. We were brothers. How'd we get so lost?”

“I don't know....”

Jacen shivered, his head lolling to one side. “I never wanted any of this, but the darkness has one hell of a hold, doesn't it? Unless you're dying apparently, then it’s the first to abandon you. For what it's worth, I'm sorry...Ben.” Jacen tipped forward, life draining from his body. Ben leaned forward to catch him. He closed his eyes as they rested against each other, forehead to forehead, fire lighting them from below.

The only warning Ben had was the quickest tremor in the Force. Ben caught Jacen’s wrist in his hand as it moved toward him, only centimeters from his chest. It wasn’t until the object fell onto the skyway that Ben realized that—as his last act—Jacen had tried to stab him with another hypo-injector. Ben slipped it into his belt out of his former friend’s reach. At the Jedi temple, Jacen would have died to protect him, but now he had tried to kill him in his last seconds of life. There was remorse swirling in Jacen’s eyes but also darkness. It hadn’t abandoned him after all. Despite what he had done, Ben held him steady as he had done for his father. The life was swiftly fading from his eyes.

"No, I’m sorry," Ben murmured. The memories of the brotherhood—the closest he had ever felt to a real family—tormented his soul. His best friend and the love of his life had killed each other, and he was to blame. “I’m sorry for everything. I am the reason you and Jaina were lost to darkness. This is all my fault. I should be the one paying for this.” In a way, he was. He never received a response, but there was a flash of recognition on the other man's face before his body became heavy under death's grasp. When his eyes clouded over, Ben pushed his friend backward over the edge of the skyway and into the fire below.

His gaze returned to the beautiful, brave woman who laid limp in his arms. He lifted her shirt to reveal the wound. Ben had seen his fair share of lightsaber injuries in battle. Objectively, he knew it was fatal. The blade had been thrust upward through her abdomen, it would be a slow, agonizing death. Which meant she was still...

“Ben?”
His throat clenched at the sound of her voice. You have to be brave for her, he demanded of himself. He had practiced hiding his emotions his entire life, but how could he hide the soul-rending agony that was tearing him apart? “I'm here, sweetheart, I'm here,” he whispered through tears. He traced the curvature of her face with his trembling fingers, gently rocking her. It was all he could do not to fall apart. “Why would you try to save me? Why would you come back for me? It wasn't supposed to be this way. You were supposed to be on Falcon!”

“So were you….” The anger and darkness built up inside him. Had the ship not already been damaged beyond repair, he had no doubt he would do it himself. The thought of losing her was unacceptable. If he lost her, he would destroy. Everything. He would burn it all down. If he had been a monster before, now, without her, he would be a creature from Hell itself, raining damnation upon the galaxy. He wouldn't stop until his last miserable breath. He had never felt so certain of anything in his entire life until…. “Ben, I'm so cold.”

He was jolted from the darkness, her voice calling him back to the light. No, he couldn't fall again, if only because she wouldn't want him to. “It's okay, it's going to be okay,” he lied to them both, his lips trembling as he sucked in an uneven breath. “I've got you. I won't let you go; I won't leave you.” The bitter, sickening taste of the lie caused a wave of nausea to crash through him. Ben excelled at denying the truth when shrouded in darkness, but there was no denying this. Love, trust, belonging, hope...he could deny it all. But there was no denying death. He had lived it for years. He knew.

“I love you, Ben.” He braced her body as she coughed violently, wincing at the sharp pain that pierced through the bond. An agonized whimper escaped him as he noticed the crimson stain he wiped from her lips.

No...Force, no, please....

“Don't Rey, don't you say goodbye. It's not goodbye. It can’t be goodbye. Please, you can't leave me. Not now. I need you. I can't....” His hand was clenched over his mouth, stifling his sobs as he rocked her in his lap. Her expression was soft, remorseful. She looked almost ethereal, the light of the fire below casting a halo around her. He blinked away the tears that blurred her face, so he could memorize her gentle smile and the reflective brightness of her eyes.

“You can,” she said softly. “You can do anything. Ben, you saved the galaxy. You're the Ben I always knew you could be.” He shook his head at the finality in her tone. His body trembled violently as he forced himself to remember that this was real, he was losing her, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Not this time; he was too weak. I'm too weak, because.... His mind wandered to his own injuries, his own lifeforce fading in the bond. The poison. It was a certainty a foregone conclusion he had reached long before the final events that had set it in motion.... I'm dying.
Though he was fading, he could sense in the bond that he was quickly losing her. By all accounts, she should already be gone. He could feel his limited lifeforce flowing into her. He was keeping her alive.

*If the Force takes her, then maybe my life will be forfeit as well.*

Even if the poison did not take him, he knew the bond would. Death would grant him that one peace. It was almost calming when destiny had revealed just how he would fall. It had been circumstances he pondered—and feared—for as long as he could remember. He was relieved that it was finally over, like a man on the run who had inevitably been caught. He had never been so grateful to face his own death. But to face hers….

“The entire galaxy is meaningless without you in it, Rey,” he said while wiping the tears from her face with his thumb. “All I wanted was for you to be safe. I failed. All of this is for nothing if I can't save you.”

He couldn't save her; he knew it without a shadow of a doubt. He had failed her, but he would hold her tightly and reassuringly, showing her safety and love in her final moments. Part of him knew he should be screaming…begging…destroying – but he oddly felt nothing. It was as if he knew it would happen all along, and the blindfold had finally been pulled from his eyes. Everything good was always taken from him.

Hunching over her to protect her from the heat of the fire growing around them, Ben resigned himself to his fate. Humming to her softly, he waited for death to take them. He couldn't save her, but he would not face a meaningless life without her, because she would take him with her. He found comfort that, no matter what they faced, they would be together. His weakening body as she drifted further from existence was testament to the strength of their bond. He truly never would be alone again. That was far more valuable than the longest life could have been.

He wrapped his trembling hands around hers, cold and pale, but still firmly gripping him back. Trapping her hand against his cheek, he kissed her palm through shuddered breaths. His cheeks were damp with tears, and she softly trailed her fingers over his skin—over his scar—to wipe them away. Smoke billowed around them, fire crept toward them, alarms blared. Time fell away like sand sifting through their fingers—their lives reduced to stolen moments.

*I wish I could spend the rest of my life holding you.*
With grim irony, he realized he would, but not in the way he wanted. Their forever was only a breath of a lifetime. It was the fate he had always been destined for. He had made the choice long ago, standing in the face of it more times than he could count. He could think of no better end than in her arms.

There was an odd acceptance shared between them. She smiled up at him as he memorized her face. There was no need for words—or perhaps neither were capable of expressing what they felt in words. The love, gratitude, trust, and peace swelled in the bond, creating a fragile euphoria as they awaited fate hand in hand. He wondered if the peculiar absence of the turbulent emotions that should have been drowning him was because he was in shock from witnessing his best friend taking the life of the woman he loved before his eyes, or if the assurance of his own death had brought him a comfort he had never known before. He wondered how tormented he would have become if he had to face a life without her. It was a torture he was incapable of imagining.

Lightsaber wounds were relatively painless, the plasma cauterizing the wound almost instantly. Rey's death would be slow, he knew—a loss of blood internally, where her body slipped into unconsciousness as her blood volume dropped, the soft thud of her pumping heart eventually slowing to a stop. If he reached into the depths of the Force, he knew he would find his conclusions correct, but nothing prepared him when, without warning, she shuddered and her eyes fluttered closed. His stomach dropped in a bone-chilling dread. The color drained from his face, and his very breath was stolen from his chest. He grasped her shoulders and shook her forcefully.

“Stay awake, Rey,” he called as evenly as he could, trying in vain to temper the quivering fear in his voice. “Open your eyes! Rey! Stay with me, sweetheart!” The longer she remained unresponsive, the deeper the panic clenched in his chest. It was as if he had fallen into the depths of the coldest ocean, suddenly hyperaware of every agonizing emotion that ripped through his soul. The calm had faded away like the illusion that it was. Had she been sending him light over the bond to give him peace?

“Please, wake up!” he begged through sobs. “Rey?”

His only thoughts centered on his inability to let her go. He didn't care that he would soon join her in the hereafter—or so he hoped—that the bond would overcome the sins he committed in darkness. He wanted her to live. She had so much still to experience, a life she deserved, a life that meant something to the universe. He never imagined the Force would be so cruel as to take her, too. She was meant to survive, to be a bright light in the darkness of the galaxy. She had spent her entire life waiting; it wasn't supposed to end so soon, so meaninglessly. The war was over. They had fulfilled the destiny the Force had fated them.

_I was never supposed to survive this, but why does she have to die?_
“Why!?” he screamed into the smokey abyss, cursing the Force for the hell it had wrought from the moment he was born. He had deserved every second of suffering he had endured, but not her. “Why would you take someone so good? She trusted in you! I trusted in you to save her! Take me! Only me!” His voice cracked as he sobbed. “Please!” Was this the price Anakin had alluded to in that desert? It would cost him everything, and he couldn't do it. The future Dev died for wasn't worth this.

He grasped for her fading energy in the Force, realizing with certainty that she would never awaken again. She was gone. Her life remained in the bond only, draining his life source to sustain the minimal requirements for life until he eventually succumbed as well. If he wanted to live, he could close himself off from the bond, slowing the flow to a trickle, but it would only prolong his life for however long it took the toxin to kill him. If he had it his way, he would die first. He couldn't watch her die.

He cursed his weakness, knowing he could only keep her alive as long as he didn't succumb to the shadow of death himself. Exhaustion lay heavy upon his own eyelids, his breathing became strained as a pressure increased in his chest. With long tendrils of energy like the beckoning fingers of fate itself, the Force around him drew away the soul from his body. His head lollled forward, his grasp on consciousness wavering.

Ben…

His eyes snapped open? Was that Luke’s voice? No, it was the hallucination of a dying mind. Still, he strained to keep his eyes open. He only fought inevitability because her life depended upon it.

*Force, please, don't take her. It's my destiny, it's my sin to atone for. Break our bond, and take me instead. I would gladly exchange my life for hers. If there is a way to save her, please let me save her. If there is anyone in this damn war who should live, let it be her. How is it fair that monsters like Sidious can use machines to survive….*

*Force Destiny.*

If the superweapon could bring Sidious back to life then….

His heart leapt to his throat, the black darkness enveloping his consciousness, clearing enough for him to understand the implications. She had a chance. He could save her, a life for a life. If he could save her with his last breath, then perhaps his life wouldn't be meaningless after all.
The only obstacle in his way was that would require bringing an unconscious Rey to *Force Destiny*. Staring down at her peaceful face, the ache in his heart returned. He was too weak. He couldn't drag himself there, let alone carry her. He was reminded of his same weakness on Ilum, when he thought he was too weak to save her. He had let go of everything, and he'd found a way. He couldn't let her die there, but what was he supposed to do? Luke had told him to let go to find the strength, but what more was there to let go? His physical body, because that was all he had left.

*What would you do, Luke?*

He tried to imagine what his uncle would say. *Use the Force, Ben.*

*How?* He couldn’t find it in himself to care that he was vividly hallucinating talking to Luke; he was desperate, even if it was ridiculous to ask the advice of a *dead man* about how not to die. Luke had intentionally….

That was it.

Ben spared one last glance at Rey with his own eyes before closing them to find a meditative peace in the Force that he hadn't found in years.
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Fatal injuries to a minor character and major character
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Ben knew that his time was extremely limited. He didn’t know the energy expenditure that it required, but he could feel himself fading. It likely didn’t help that he had to exhaust more energy to carry Rey, but he didn’t care; they were closing in on Force Destiny. The secured blast doors stood open, and the guard’s posts were abandoned, a result of the ship entering emergency procedures due to its imminent failure.

That was another reason time was limited. Sirens blared around them, smoke hugging the ceiling as it danced down the corridor. The Finalizer was disabled and defenseless. If the Resistance triggered a meltdown in the reactor with a precise enough strike, the whole thing would go. Ben wouldn’t concern himself with that. Either he would save Rey, or he would die trying. There was no other option.

Ben had hoped it would end on Force Destiny—a long shot with all he had to overcome, but a hope nonetheless—but he had never imagined it would be her life he’d be racing to save. He hadn’t known before how he would get there, but he couldn’t stop the overwhelming thought that had tormented him since he had taken his father’s dice from the Millennium Falcon. The Force Destiny machine needed a body or an object imbued with one’s soul. If there was any object imbued with his father’s soul—other than the Millennium Falcon itself—it would be those dice.

It had seemed so simple. Once he had completed his mission, he would have taken the dice to that machine. He had been certain if he just had the chance, he could have saved his father. Han had come back for him; he wanted nothing more than to exchange his life so his father could live. It caused a profound ache in his chest that it wasn’t an option anymore.

But he had to save Rey.

It hadn’t even been a question—exchanging his life for hers. He had already done it in the caves. He loved her more than anything; he would have died happy knowing she was safe. The Force had given him a chance to do more than just save her, and he had—he had done everything he could to ensure the fall of the First Order. Now that the galaxy was safe, he would exchange their fates and be at peace. If that was his last act before he met his fate, then he couldn’t think of a better way to die.

Ben had read enough about Force Destiny to know how it functioned. The issue was that he couldn’t use the machine as it had been intended without help. To save her, his lifeforce would
already have to be in that liquid. But if he strapped Rey into the machine, and turned it on, then he could sit down into that pool and push his life force out of his body and into the liquid. With his limited understanding of the machine, it should work. It had to work.

Ben would leave her lightsaber in her hand, so she could escape when she awoke. Maybe a part of her would hear him when he told her loved her. It was probably better this way, Ben was never very adept at goodbyes. He knew it would hurt her to see what he had done, but he hoped she would run and find her friends and be safe. He wanted her to live. That was all that mattered.

There was an uneasiness he felt walking down the corridor that led to that door. He had felt it when he had come in search of Rey. He felt it now. There was an uncertainty of whether he would succeed, yes, but there was something else. It was the warning in the Force, perhaps, or the barely visible trail of blood streaking across the black floor. He had anticipated challenges running the machine with his own physical limits.

What Ben hadn’t anticipated was that the Force Destiny would already be in use.

Walking through the door of the final room in Weapons Development, Ben was met by his—still alive—red-headed adversary. He had left the man gasping his final breaths on the Command Bridge; how had he made it to Force Destiny? The only other people who had been inside that room were the knights, and they were all busy fighting him.

No, not all.

Jacen had been missing from the fight. He had reappeared with blood staining his clothes. But Jacen had no reason to help Hux; he had no allegiance to him. Hux’s life was meaningless to the knight… unless he had something Jacen needed. Or knew something.

“Still alive, I see,” Hux panted, steadying himself against the controls of the machine.

“The feeling is mutual, Hux.”

Any further retort was abandoned when another voice—an all-too-familiar voice—reverberated from the corner. “In my case, ‘alive again’ would be more appropriate.” Ben turned to find… himself, staring back at him.
Another clone.

There was something different about this clone than the first one he’d had the displeasure of encountering. There was an air about him that was more confident and formidable. Pure evil. It gave Ben pause. A smile split the man’s face, if something mirthless and wicked could be called a smile. It was a smile Ben recognized well, but not on himself. He hoped he would never see that smile again. Ben clenched his jaw to fetter the fear building inside him.

No, he can’t be...he can’t be here.

The clone stepped toward him, his boots echoing in the chamber. Ben focused on keeping his breathing steady and his thoughts secure. He hadn’t been this terrified since facing his uncle on Crait. The man stopped in front of him, appraising him. “I am disappointed, Kylo Ren. This is not the welcome I expected from the rebellious child who murdered me. Too blinded by your own failure to recognize your master?”

Ben’s blood ran cold as he gently set Rey at his feet, steeling himself for the inevitable wrath of a nightmare reborn. He had failed, but not in the way his once master had suggested.

Sidious.

It’s too late.

Hux, who had been watching their exchange with interest, slid weakly to the floor. “Excuse me, Supreme Leader, but you promised to heal me in exchange—”

Ben didn’t take his eyes off the clone whose arm extended toward the general, his hand clenched. Gurgles and gasps sounded from the general’s direction. Ben could feel the spike in the Force as the clone manipulated it around Hux’s throat.

To Ben, it was as if he was watching a holovideo of what he had done to the man. There was something slimy and uncomfortable growing in the pit of his stomach. It was different, somehow, seeing what he had done from the third person; less justified.

“Stop.” He tried to say it as evenly, as emotionlessly, as he could muster. He tried to exude an air of authority, his insides twisting in terror.
The other man turned, the evil smile growing wider, as he flicked his wrist and severed Hux’s mortal coil. Ben had enough practice not to flinch as the red-headed man’s body fell to the ground. “He deserved it for what he’s done,” the clone said dispassionately. “When I left him the plans for the machine, it was intended to resurrect my army, not me. I am more powerful in the World Between Worlds. I made him believe it was for me, because I needed him to build the machine, but I never thought he’d be foolish enough to use it.” He spat the last words in the direction of Hux’s corpse. “I chose him as my general because the fool wanted power. He had no intention of using the machine to resurrect me, and I knew you wouldn’t either. He did everything according to plan until you stabbed him, and the coward feared his death. You should have killed him, Kylo Ren. Or should I say young Solo?”

“Ben Solo—that is my name,” he replied, biting back his fear. “What should I call you?”

“Sidious, Snoke, Palpatine… Kylo Ren if you prefer. That is, until I take a new name. The fool gave me the only vessel available, one without the Force, unfortunately. My power is absolute, but not in this weakened vessel. I will need a better one to rule my army,” Sidious laughed as he stepped forward, and Ben took a reactive step back. “Yours would do nicely. Or hers.”

“No!”

“It’s unfortunate I missed all the fun,” the clone of himself continued, nodding toward Rey. “I would have enjoyed draining her lifeforce before your eyes.” Ben’s anger ignited, but he restrained himself. He knew Sidious was searching for a reaction. “I wonder, would you scream for her, as your grandfather screamed for his wife when I took her from him?” Ben shuddered with realization as his eyes snapped up to meet his former master.

*Anakin didn’t kill Padme. Sidious did. To turn him.*

“If you touch her—”

“You will…what…murder me again? Return me to the World Between Worlds?” His voice sounded like Ben’s, but there was something uniquely terrifying about the apathy this creature mastered. It was something Ben had always tried to feign, but he knew this was no guise. “Do your best, child; there’s nothing for me to lose here. I return to find my Order in ruins because of the failure of my apprentice-turned-Resistance-anarchist. Do you have any idea the planning it required, the mountain of bodies it necessitated, to fight my way to the top as a nobody like Snoke? It was pure chance that I knew of him and his limited powers shortly before my death—that Brendol Hux was able to convince him to create *Force Destiny*. My Contingency assured the rebirth of the Empire. The others wanted Gallius Rax, Rae Sloane, or Ormes Apolin—not an
unknown Force-wielder like Snoke—but I manipulated and murdered my way to become the Supreme Leader.”

“I spent two decades turning you into the perfect rabid cur. Imagine my delight that the spawn of the most powerful bloodline created by the Force itself, the prodigy of the Jedi Order, son of legends, and blood to Luke Skywalker—my greatest adversary—had the potential for both powerful light and powerful darkness. And his family had no idea what to do with him…they were powerless to stop my influence. It was destiny that I would find my revenge through you—the grandson of the Chosen One. I had the entire galaxy in my grasp, and you—weak, conflicted, waste of the blood in your veins—threw it all away for some scavenger. You joined the rebels to fight against everything you believe in!”

“—everything you believe in.”

“You are my greatest disappointment,” the creature hissed. For the first time, Ben felt pride in reaction to that statement.

“Why?” Ben asked with a defiant smile of his own. “I became exactly what you wanted me to be—my grandfather. He killed you for Luke, and I killed you for her.”

“Skywalkers and their sentiment,” the creature tutted, staring down at Rey. Ben moved to stand over her protectively. The clone smirked. “How unfortunate that sentiment couldn't save her.” Sidious’s piercing stare returned to Ben’s. There was something terrifyingly victorious in them. “Or could it?”

And there it was—evil disguised as the only option. That was something Ben had learned about evil. It wasn’t easily identifiable. It wasn’t as simple as the dark or the light, good or bad. Sometimes the worst atrocities imaginable had started with good intentions; sometimes the noblest aspirations had dire consequences. Sometimes people made the wrong choices for the right reasons; sometimes war, death, and destruction were the only way to save the galaxy. Sometimes liberty was lost with thunderous applause. Sometimes bad people were right, and sometimes good people were wrong, but that didn’t change what they fought for. Sometimes evil looked and sounded like something good. It was disguised as the best option, the only option.

Ben knew then what Sidious would offer him: use the machine to save her life, forfeiting his own life to Sidious in return. With the clone’s body, Sidious was currently “limited” in his Force-sensitivity to what he alone possessed. In that nightmare he shared with Rey, Ben had felt the creature’s incredible incorporeal power. Life may have removed his access to the World Between Worlds, and his connection to the Force muted by a non-sensitive body, but his powers remained attached to his soul, he was far from harmless in the Force.
But Sidious was greedy, he wanted more power than just his own. He wanted to incarnate another Force-sensitive body like Snoke, or Ben, to make him more powerful than any other—and without Ben’s light, sentiment, and hope, he would have the fearsome Force warrior he’d always wanted. He would become Kylo Ren. He could lead the Dark Army to dominate the galaxy. Sidious wielding their combined power would be unstoppable. The monster would weave a story of hatred and betrayal—of a man who abandoned his family, killed his master for power, and believed his destiny was to create an Empire. Maybe he would claim the death of Rey as Kylo’s final turn to darkness. As the most powerful man in the galaxy, he could write the history holobooks to tell whatever story he wanted to be remembered.

Had Ben faced this dilemma in the throne room, or even after Crait, when Rey hated him the most, or any moment up until the very one where he stood in Force Destiny, he would have made the choice to save her without a second thought. It was the best option, the only option, to save her. Since the moment he knew who she was, her life meant more to him than anything in the galaxy. He loved her. Giving his life for hers was an easy trade, it always had been. Perhaps that was why his heart ached as if it had been ripped out of his chest.

Ben understood now, however, that there was a galaxy beyond them. Good would have been done by saving her, but the evil wrought upon the galaxy in exchange was unimaginable. If he saved her, the sole consequence wouldn’t be his death. Sidious would wield Ben’s body, use Rey to fool the Resistance into suspending their attack until he found the perfect moment to destroy them. She would lose her freedom. Sidious wouldn’t let her go. She would be a prisoner, a slave again, or, worse, she’d fall to darkness. Even if she escaped, what kind of life would she live? Rose, Finn, Dameron—her family—would all be dead. Ben would be a monster. The galaxy would fall to Sidious’s wrath. There would be more Hosnian Primes, more Alderaans.

Ben, I loved her more than anything else. His grandfather had told him. I was blind. I let the entire galaxy suffer so I could save her, and I lost her anyway.

There was a call in his soul, drawing his attention as the will of the Force guided him. He knew what it was guiding him to do, and every last bit of the light and darkness inside him wanted to fight against it. He had been fighting destiny for the majority of his life, then trying to bend his fate in the Force to his own will—but his role was slowly unfurling before his eyes. Though the mere thought of accepting it made him want to scream and cry and rage and collapse to the blood-streaked floor. He understood that the future would unfold as the Force willed. It was an outcome he would have actively fought against until his last breath. He would have given up anything, because he couldn’t ever imagine giving up when he had a chance to save her.

He remembered her last words to him. You can do anything. Ben, you saved the galaxy. You’re the Ben I always knew you could be.
Ben knew now what it would cost. If he saved Rey, it would cost everything good in the galaxy. If he...let her go, it would cost *him* everything good in the galaxy. He exhaled slowly, trying to grasp the incomprehensible consequences. He would gladly exchange his life for hers, but could he exchange her fate for the fate of the entire galaxy? Perhaps in his love, he could have rationalized it, if he didn’t know for certain what Rey would want him to do: what his grandfather couldn’t. Though it split his heart in two, that was enough.

It was his choice to make, but he trusted in the Force. He had to. He had to believe that all the suffering endured by both of them had not been in vain. Perhaps one day, when he could see the bigger picture formed in the Cosmic Force, he would understand. Until then, it wasn’t his role. It was the only hope he could hold onto. This would cost him *everything*, but he knew what he had to do.

As his lifeforce continued to drain into the bond, he moved to the controls on the machine. “Wise choice, young Skywalker,” Sidious hissed. Ben wondered then what the history holobooks would say about the Skywalkers. The choices made by Anakin, Luke, and himself had inevitably led the galaxy to suffer under darkness—choices influenced by the very creature before him. Would the galaxy rejoice that the bloodline that had brought such suffering would end? Would anyone care what the last Skywalker gave up in a room in Weapons Development with the fate of the galaxy on the line? Or would their mistakes forever outweigh the good they had chosen in their last breaths? He wondered what they would have done had they stood in his place. He knew what Sidious believed they would do, what *he* would do. What Ben did know was that Sidious forgot that he wasn’t just a Skywalker. Ben was a Solo. Solos didn’t always make the right decision, but they did when it counted. And Solos were nothing if not unpredictable. His father had given his life to bring Ben back to the light; he wouldn’t let him down.

Ben ignited his lightsaber, and Sidious created a Force barrier around his new body—but Ben had no intention of using the weapon against him. Ben thrust his blade into the door panel, locking them inside. Then he did what he did best—destroy. The bright plasma burned glowing lines in the controls, severing connections and overheating the internal circuitry, breaking it beyond repair. The creature reached out, sending arcs of lightning to stop him, but Ben was ready. He called Rey’s lightsaber in his hand, wielding it to block the deadly blue arcs until he could thrust his own lightsaber down into the machine. The lights on the controls flickered and the lightning stopped. But Ben didn’t. He hacked and slashed as he had done to many a control panel before, destroying it not in fury but righteousness. When he was done, the control panel was a molten heap of embers.

*Force Destiny* was gone.


“It’s my nature,” Ben said, remembering the story of the poisonous Porcuspine and the Gundark.
He slumped down against the burning control console, sliding to the floor. It was beyond salvageable. He couldn’t save Rey or bring back his father as he had hoped, but he had stopped the monster.

*I’m sorry.*

Ben knew that without his help, without Rey, Sidious would perish on the *Finalizer*. The destruction of the ship was imminent. If Sidious did escape, the Resistance would be there to intercept him. Though they would believe him to be Kylo, the former Supreme Leader was still a war criminal and would be executed for his crimes. By claiming the life of Hux, the only other man who knew of the *Force Destiny*, Sidious had sealed his own fate.

Ben sank into a pleasant existence between life and death. Remembering the light that brightened Rey’s eyes when she told him she loved him, he let go of his firm grip on the Force and drifted. It was a memory worth carrying him into eternity.

Ben smiled.

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder and opened his eyes to see the panicked faces of Finn and Rose.
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Death of minor character
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The feeling of his Force projection rejoining his physical body was a jarring and disorienting sensation, and not one Ben had expected to live through. He had intended to use the Force projection to carry Rey to the Force Destiny, giving himself enough strength in his meditative state to save her, before succumbing to exhaustion as his uncle had before him. Only, Ben hadn’t. Not that it mattered; he had failed, there would be no saving Rey. The machine was destroyed. Rey would be proud of him, he hoped, when they saw each other again.

“He’s alive!” Finn shouted to Rose and Blue. There was a wall of white behind them in the flickering darkness, and he realized they were stormtroopers. Finn had done it, the stormtroopers had rebelled. Ben’s vision was out of focus, but he could see the fear and hope in their eyes. Finn’s hand was on Ben’s shoulder, where he had broken him from his meditation. Blue was beside them, asking questions about the woman who was on all their minds.

“Get back on the Falcon, this place could go any second,” he rasped. He knew it wouldn’t be that simple when Blue beeped and whirred at him angrily for leaving him behind. Finn and Rose were of a similar mindset.

“Where’s Rey?”

Ben knew it was coming, but he hadn’t counted on how much it hurt to hear aloud. He looked away, so her friends wouldn’t see the sorrow that bore tracks down his cheeks. He swallowed his emotions, puffed out his cheeks and exhaled slowly. “Rey is….”

Then he felt it. There was a reverse in the flow that was slowly draining his lifeforce in the bond. Her side of the bond, which had grown dark in her unconsciousness, was slowly brightening. He could feel her life returning, her body healing. It was impossible. Her wound was fatal; the bond couldn’t do this, the bond wasn’t doing this.

If Ben wasn’t doing this, then that meant… Sidious.

He should have known Sidious wouldn’t be so easily defeated.

“Rey is at the Force Destiny, with Snoke, who is actually Darth Sidious; but he doesn’t look like Snoke, because he’s inside my body. Not my body, but a clone.” Finn and Rose exchanged a weighted glance before Finn mumbled something about how much he hated the Force. “The
machine is broken, but he has her as his prisoner. He won’t hurt her, because he needs her to get off this ship. Go. Do whatever you have to do to get her back. *Kill him.*”

Instead of leaving, Finn stepped toward him and offered his hand to his old adversary. “No, you have to leave me,” Ben ground out. “I’m not strong enough, I’ll slow you down. Save her, and tell her—”

“Tell her yourself; you’re coming with us,” Rose insisted firmly as Finn grasped Ben’s forearm and pulled him up. “In our family, no one gets left behind.”

Finn laid Ben’s arm over his shoulder, supporting most of his weight. In his uniform, the height difference was less drastic, but Ben didn’t mind hunching over in his weakness. Another stormtrooper stood on the other side, assisting in keeping him upright.

“Do you need me to hit you again?” Finn huffed under his weight.

“Please.”

Rose stood off to the side, arms crossed, glaring between them. “There’s something seriously wrong…with both of you.” Finn chuckled as she pushed past him muttering, “No, really, you two are made for each other.”

Ben used the Force as a crutch as best he could in his weakness, choosing to block himself from the bond rather than risk draining the life that had been returned to her. He knew he wouldn’t make it, but he would fight as long as he could.

They made a painstakingly valiant effort, but when they reached Weapons Development, Ben’s legs gave out. It was an inevitability, he knew, that the poison would impair his nervous system, but he regretted dragging Finn to the ground with him. He had hoped he would see her one last time, but the Force had other plans. He wasn’t afraid; he trusted her friends would save Rey.

Finn knelt over him screaming something, but he couldn’t hear him over the ringing in his ears. He could barely see Rose standing behind her fiancé, her hand covering her mouth, as the darkness seeped into the corners of his vision. His connection to the conscious world was fraying. Death would be swift.
Ben. Not yet.

He opened his eyes in search of the owner of that voice. “Mom?” She was not there, of course. Only Finn, Rose, Blue, and the stormtroopers looked back at him.

Ben had fought against the building waves of unconsciousness just long enough, however, to feel the change in his body. The numbness faded to cold, and, in turn, the cold faded to warmth. The pain subsided. The heaviness of his weakness lifted like a weighted blanket. His chest rose and fell without the strenuous effort that had plagued him seconds before. Ben sat up slowly as the viscosity of the contamination bled away. He looked down at his hands, and watched the black weaving through his pale skin begin to recede. The most telling sign was the flood of energy that crashed through his senses, making him whole.

The Force.

“No,” he whispered, his stomach churning in understanding. “No!”
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See the end of the chapter for more notes
Rey blinked her eyes, adjusting to the room. She had only just closed them as Ben had begged her to stay awake, but the heaviness of her eyelids had been too overpowering. Her eyes adjusted to her surroundings. They were no longer on the skyway, but as she lifted her head, she realized they were at Force Destiny. Hux lay dead, eyes unseeing, a few meters away. The control panel for the machine had been reduced to embers. When she attempted to sit up, she realized that the pain she had felt before was gone. Her hand felt for the wound left by Jacen’s lightsaber, but it was as if it never existed. It made no sense. Where were her injuries? Why was she in the Force Destiny room? Why was Hux there, when he had been on the Command Bridge with Ben?

“Hello, sweetheart,” his hand touched her face, tenderly as he had before, but that same tenderness was missing from his eyes. A fear shuddered through her, but everything else looked right. His borrowed crimson shirt was still too tight. The scar she had given him still split his face. She could feel the power radiating off him. He had even called her “sweetheart,” and only Ben knew that term of endearment for her. Her fear likely originated from her confusion over what had happened since she had closed her eyes.

“I don’t understand,” she said, leaning into his touch. “Where’s Jacen and the wound; how did we end up here?”

“Jacen and the Knights kidnapped you, Hux brought you to Force Destiny, you killed him and,” he shrugged, “here I am.”

Was it all a dream?

Ben smiled, as if in response. “Come with me. Let’s get off this ship.”

The fear returned. “What about my friends?” If she had dreamt everything since waking up in the Force Destiny, then they could still be in a detention cell.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “They’re safe.” Everything he said was perfect, everything he did was perfect. Why does this still feel wrong? Is there something else I’m not seeing, something that has nothing to do with Ben? Or what if it involves Ben and it’s… the poison!

“Ben, what about the poison!?” That had to be it. That had to be why something felt off, why his
appearance seemed slightly different, why the fear wouldn’t fade.

He blinked once, and then the words flowed with ease, “What are you talking about? I was never poisoned. I’m fine. It must have been a Force Illusion by the Knights; didn’t Skywalker teach you what that is?” His smile was easy, but it wasn’t one she recognized on Ben.

Of course, I know what that is, you told me what it was earlier, when we had the argument about Jaina in that navigation room...

No, none of that would be real if I never left Force Destiny. Nothing that I remember doing with you since coming here would be real. And if that’s true....

Then how did I recognize the shirt you are wearing?

Her hands trailed down to the small satchel at her waist, fingers sifting through the objects inside. The shiver through her body was as cold as the objects in her fingers. “You’re not Ben.”

Rey ignited her lightsaber and stood to face him, but he made no move to shy away. His hand twitched, stopping her in her pursuit, and throwing her backward against the control panel. “Such spunk,” he laughed. There was something about his behavior that was different. Where the first clone had been almost droid-like and absent in the Force, this one was toying with her now as Snoke...Sidious had in the throne room. “How did you know?”

“Where is he?”

“Dead,” the clone said dispassionately. “He was too weak to stand. He brought you to the Force Destiny through Force projection to save you, then succumbed to it as Skywalker did.”

No! No, that... that can’t be true. He was just...

The terror settled in her chest as his words rang of truth.

Ben, are you there?
He wasn’t dead. She would know, she would know. Wouldn’t she? Rey searched through the Force for the bond, but could feel nothing. Remembering his weakness on the skyway, she tried to force away the truth. There was no denying what it meant that she couldn’t feel him. She could, however, feel the Force within this clone. It was powerful.

Rey could barely stand under the weight of her heartbreak, but she lifted the lightsaber with all the strength she had. Gritting her teeth, she sprinted toward him. This time, he lazily nodded, sending her flying past him into the far wall. The lightsaber clattered to the ground, the indigo blades disappearing inside the chambers. She picked it up and stood again, undeterred. He underestimated her, but she had been underestimated by people her entire life. She would prove him wrong.

“I don’t want to hurt you!” his voice was raised but his emotions were even. He raised his hands in supplication, “I’m nobody. I don’t want to hurt anyone, I don’t want to serve these people. I know I lied to you, I’m sorry, but I couldn’t see any other way you’d help me! I know I’m a clone, I’m nothing but a weapon to these people. But I’m alive, and I want to be free. I have Ben’s memories, his knowledge of healing. With my power, I can restore his life, if you swear to help me escape off this ship and find me safe passage to Jakku.”

Rey paused. She understood what it was like to feel as if she were nothing, to serve a man who treated her like property. Compassion tightened behind her ribs as she imagined the life that had been thrust upon him. This man was no different than Finn, raised to be a weapon and forced to obey. He was asking her to help him, and it would bring her Ben back. It was worth every risk she could imagine, including losing the alliance to the Resistance, because it was her only chance to save him.

Rey refused to look at the clone to hide the hope she feared he would read in her eyes. “How do I know you’ll save him?”

“You’ll feel him across your bridged minds,” he said. It was difficult not to trust the man. His deep voice was comforting in its familiarity, his face identical to the man she had learned to love. Ben was all but standing there before her, pleading for her help. The problem was, it wasn’t Ben, and if she didn’t help him, then her Ben was gone forever.

“Do it,” her voice broke as she imagined the fate of her bondmate, “and I promise, I’ll help you.”

The clone grinned.
Chapter End Notes

Discussion of death
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Fear. Rage. Hatred.

Ben never thought he would feel the Force in its full strength in his veins again. Its power was welcoming in his rampage. The others followed behind him, but not closely. They whispered about
him, which wasn’t especially unusual, but it distracted him from his singular focus. He could hear fragments of their conversations.

“His eyes are….”

“Mhmm….”

“Is he…?”

“I don’t know….?”

“He looks….”

“Yep….”

“Should we…?”

“Nope.”

“Have you seen him this…?”

“No, and I’ve seen him slaughter villages.”

“I’m glad he’s on our side.”

His lightsaber was by his side, spitting, angry, as wild in intensity as he was. Ben had warned Sidious not to touch Rey; if he was too late…. There would be blood, regardless. His blade would end his former master if it was the last thing he did. The darkness surged through him, but he couldn’t find it in him to care. They turned the last corner, and he stopped, inhaling sharply, the lightsaber slipping from his fingers and crashing to the floor.
She was alive, perfect, as if the past few hours had never happened. He blinked repeatedly to reassure himself that she was real. Chewing his lip to bite back his emotions, he waited to hear the voice he had never thought he would hear again. His vision was blurring, but he couldn’t fall apart. His ferocity toward the monster—who looked no different than himself—had all but vanished under the overwhelming relief at seeing her bright hazel eyes. She stared back at him as if he were the one who had been run through with a blade.

“Ben?” she whispered, but a shadow of distrust passed over her features. “No, it can’t be.”

He could feel her energy in the Force, but it was weak, as if it had been suppressed. “What did you do to her, Sidious!?”

“Sidious?”

“He is Sidious,” the monster lied, nodding toward Ben. “Look at the clothes, the absence of the scar, you know it’s not him. He’s here to take us prisoner, Rey, please help me! Don’t let him kill me!”

Rey’s lightsaber was in her hand in a blink. She stood between the clone and her friends, staring at Ben as if the clone’s words were the truth. It didn’t make sense. She had seen the clothes he was wearing earlier. His hand slid up to his face. The scar was still there. How could she… Force Illusion. Sidious was manipulating her with a Force Illusion.

“What are you talking about?” Finn asked, his face twisted in confusion as he turned to Rey. “These are the clothes he’s been wearing since he rescued us from our cells. That is the scar you gave him, Rey. We found him on a skywalk with the dead Knights who kidnapped us. This is not a clone; I know Ben, this is him. That is the imposter,” Finn said, pointing at the clone. Finn shrugged when Ben turned to him, brows raised in disbelief. Rey’s hands were searching for something in her satchel, as if whatever she kept in there held the answers. She closed her palm around an object he couldn’t see. Her eyes slowly raised to his.

Please, Rey, you know me.

“That’s not Ben,” he whispered. “I am.”
Rey’s expression remained guarded. “I know he’s not Ben.”

With a sigh of relief, Ben stepped toward her, but she raised the lightsaber and backed away. There was a flash of distrust in her eyes. “Who do you think he is?” he asked.

“A clone, just like you are,” she said, pointing the indigo blade in his direction. “But he warned me about you. He said you would come for us.”

“I’m no imposter, Rey. I tried to leave you on the Falcon. You came for me. You helped me fight the Knights. But then Jacen….” Ben finally said aloud the words that he thus far refused to admit. “I watched you die.” It was Finn’s turn to stare at him in disbelief, but he wouldn’t meet his eyes, not when the agony of that moment still lingered in his. “You were alive in the bond only. I brought you to Force Destiny to save you….”

“Search through the Force,” the clone whispered behind her. “You won’t feel his energy. This isn’t the man you’re bonded to, he’s still unconscious. Sidious is trying to trick you, but you know the truth, Rey. We have to kill him, or we can’t escape!”

Rey’s eyes bounced between the two identical men, before finding safety with Finn’s pleading stare. “This clone just brought Ben back,” she told her friend. “He was dead. He couldn’t have woken up, found you, and made it here in the time it took for us to walk out of Force Destiny. He tricked you.”

“Yes,” Sidious hissed in her ear.

“He didn’t die,” Rose cut in. “We made it to the entrance of Weapons Development, and he collapsed from the overdose. We thought we were watching him die, but then it all disappeared like it never happened.”

“Sidious is controlling their minds,” the clone continued, “They would never defend Ben.”

“You wouldn’t,” Rey agreed. “You hated him, Finn.”

Finn exhaled slowly, rubbing his hand over his face. “Even Poe is working with Ben; can we just admit that a lot has happened in the last twelve hours?”
Rey shook her head. Ben could barely feel her in the Force, but he could see the darkness in her eyes. The clone was convincing her of lies. “Ben was weak. I felt it. He couldn’t have carried me to *Force Destiny*."

“You’re right, I was too weak to carry you physically,” Ben agreed. At least they were getting somewhere. If he could just reason with her, maybe it would break the hold the darkness held over her. “I carried you there through Force Projection.”

For a split-second, there seemed to be recognition in her eyes. He thought he had broken through to her. That is, until fire ignited in her eyes and she slashed the lightsaber wide to force him to step back. “Then you would be dead!” she cried. “Ben would know that, because that’s how his uncle died, and Luke wasn’t so weak that he couldn’t *stand*!”

“I wasn’t creating a projection across the galaxy, it required less—”

Rey wouldn’t listen to reason, not under the pervasive deceit of darkness. “If you didn’t die, then why would you leave me there!? *Ben* would never leave me!”

Until she made that claim, Ben had been as calm and as patient as he could have been under those circumstances. But with those words, he snapped. “I didn’t want to! He offered me the chance to save you if I gave him myself, *my* power. I couldn’t do it. I destroyed the machine so he couldn’t use either of us. I was prepared to hold you in my arms and die together! You have to believe me!” There was a spark of light in her eyes, and he held hope that she had found truth in what he said, but just as quickly, she was drowning in darkness again.

“You *know* that isn’t Ben,” the clone whispered. “He would burn this entire galaxy down to save your life.”

Rey clenched her jaw and flipped her lightsaber in a flourish. “He’s right.”

“Rey, I’m not under mind control, you are, like what happened on our way to Ilum,” Rose tried. “This is Ben, he’s telling the truth. We all were there. He was meditating when we found him; we woke him up. He could barely stand. Finn had to help him get here. If you won’t believe him, believe us.”

Her eyes were still dark, but there was a flash of uncertainty in them. Something Rose had said had
gotten through to Rey. “Prove it,” she said, eyeing him with suspicion as she turned. “Prove you’re Ben.”

Ben could feel the plea from the light inside her. She wanted to believe him. He remembered that struggle, when the darkness held him firmly in its grasp, and he wanted desperately to believe her. She hadn’t given up on him, and he wouldn’t fail her. What could he say that would prove that he was real? It wasn’t as if he had any proof…. As she shuffled on her feet nervously, he noticed a glint in her hand as she clenched and unclenched her fists. It was a long shot, but it was all he had. “I know what you have in your other hand. I gave those to you. I told you I’d come back for them.”

Rey stared down at her fist. Her fingers were rolling the objects anxiously. She clenched her eyes shut and shook her head. He feared it wasn’t enough to overcome the darkness. “Still don’t believe me?” He reached into the pocket of his belt and waited for her darkness-eclipsed eyes to find his. He tossed her the small golden object. “Why would a clone have this?”

Rey released a shuddered breath, then turned to Ben’s former master. “You!” she realized. “You’re no clone; that’s why you have the Force! You used the Force Destiny to take over the clone! You killed your own general!”

Always prepared to adapt, Sidious smiled. “Of course, I did.” He stepped forward, tutting in disapproval, as he unclenched her free fist, sending the silver objects clattering to the floor around them. She held onto the other object her hand, but he pried her fingers apart to find the treasure she hid.

He turned to Ben in disgust. “Code cylinders… and a pair of dice? You force me to do this over your father’s dice? The strength of your weakness is astounding,” he sighed. “It would have been less painful for all of you if you had have just… let… go. It’s too late; she has promised me her loyalty.”

The clone shifted his focus to Rey, lifting her chin with the Force. “Prove the sincerity of your vow. Let me into your mind and provide me safe passage to my destination, or I’ll reverse what I’ve done in exchange.”

“Don’t do it, Rey,” Ben demanded, calling his lightsaber from the floor.

“It’s okay, Ben.” There was a grim acceptance in her eyes. Sidious needed a new body to reach his full potential—he needed a Force-sensitive—but Force Destiny was no longer an option. At least, not this Force Destiny. To escape, his former master needed a member of the Resistance. Sidious’s
plans had changed; he didn’t need Ben anymore. Rey satisfied both needs, and Ben had taken her right to him.

Ben realized then, she knew the trade she was being asked to make, and she was prepared to make it. But he was prepared to do whatever he had to do to stop her. Searching for her energy in the Force, he pressed through the shadow of illusion to find the bond on the other side. Opening himself to the bond, he pressed his words into their connection.

*No, Rey, you can’t do this.*

*Ben, it’s okay. I was a prisoner on Jakku to Unkar Plutt and my denial. I know how to survive. If I have to be his prisoner to save you, then I’ll do it. You traded your life for mine on Ilum, I’m only exchanging my freedom.*

*Freedom is everything. This would be a punishment worse than death.*

*If freedom is everything, then my love for you is more than everything. I would give up my freedom, the Force, my last portion of food for you, Ben Solo. This is the only way we both survive.*

*I won’t let you.*

*As long as I know you’re alive, I will survive this. I know that as long as you have one breath still inside you, you will never stop looking for me. I’m good at waiting, and this time, I know I have a family who will come back for me. You will find me, one day, and then we can be together again.*

He felt her raise the barriers between them, shutting him out. She should have known he wouldn’t give up so easily. “No, Rey! He wants to use you as leverage to get off this ship. Then he’ll try turn you, to lead his Dark Army, or he’ll take you to the other *Force Destiny* machine and—”

Ben recognized the tightness around his throat before he attempted to take another breath. Sidious’s grip in the Force was strong, and Ben knew it wasn’t a game this time. He squared his shoulders and clenched his jaw, determined not to give Sidious the leverage he desired. Finn must have seen the life draining from his eyes, because he took one look at Ben and jumped into action. The former stormtrooper rushed forward, prepared to tackle the clone to the ground in his fury, but
Sidious waited until he was mid-air before shoving him backward with the Force, sending him crashing into the corridor wall.

“Finn!” Rose shouted, as she ran to him. Finn slumped into her lap, unconscious, but alive. Ben collapsed to his knees, his muscles weakening as his body was starved of oxygen. Blue was immediately by his side, screaming in confusion.

“I’ll kill them,” Sidious warned.

Ben shook his head, but Rey was already answering. “I’ll do it! Please, stop, I’ll do it!”

Ben fell forward onto his hands as the grip on his throat was released. “No, Rey!” he rasped as he sucked in a breath. “I won’t let you do this!”

“And I won’t let you die!”

*Then I won’t give you the choice.*

This was more than just them; the fate of the galaxy was at stake. As Rose helped an awake and dizzy Finn to his feet, Ben pulled the hypo-injector from his belt. He wondered fleetingly if it was the same solution as before, or if Jacen had made this one more lethal. The black poison inside glimmered even in the flickering darkness. He removed the cap with his teeth.

Ben pointed the injector toward Sidious. He hoped his own laugh wasn’t as terrifying when it came from his identical throat. “What do you think you can do with that, boy?” the creature taunted. “You think I’ll *let* you near me before I rip you, or her, apart? You cannot catch me unaware this time, Ren. If you had taken the map as I commanded, if you hadn’t *made* me bridge your minds, then you wouldn’t have forced me to do this! Face it: you’re weak, you’ve failed, she’s mine. This time, I’ve anticipated your compassion and used it against you. There is no move here.”

“The barriers are down, Sidious, let’s go!” she begged.

Ben's hand didn’t move from its position, but he tilted his head to face his bondmate. “Don’t do this, Rey.”
“I have to,” she said, eyes pooling with both remorse and conviction.

His voice cracked as he forced out the words. “Then so do I.”

Before he had finished his sentence, he had plunged the hypo-injector into his arm. Rey screamed and ripped the injector from his hand with the Force, but it had already released the majority of its contents into his bloodstream. He cried out into the corridor as the poison turned the blood in his veins to something molten and viscous. “Forgive me,” he whispered, as he clenched his fists to fight the pain burning through his body.

“Ben, what have you done!” She turned to Sidious, her tone desperate. “Please! I’ll go with you! Save him!” The creature, for once, was at a loss for words.

“He can’t,” Ben wheezed. “Can you, master?” Even a monster like Sidious couldn’t hide that truth in the clone’s expressive eyes.

“His power in the Force is limited in his new body,” Ben continued. “He needed a Force-sensitive to compound his strength, not a clone. He expended a critical amount of power to heal you, then me. If he saved me again, he could die.”

“No!” Before anyone could blink, Rey swung her lightsaber upward in one fluid motion. His former master growled in pain as the blade sliced his face open, carving it in two as she had once done to Ben. The blade had cut deeply into his face, cauterizing one eye, making him look more creature than man. He looked more like Sidious in that moment, than he ever could have as Ben. Rey pivoted the weapon around, using his shock as an advantage, thrusting the lightsaber into the former Emperor’s left side.

Ben was still staggering in the burning aftermath of the glitterstim concoction, but it would have been impossible to miss, in the seconds following the poison entering his bloodstream, the will of the Force guiding him toward a sobering realization. Rey had cut open the monster’s face because Sidious had been distracted. They could win.

Rey moved for the fatal blow, but Sidious easily overpowered her in the Force, tearing the lightsaber from her grasp. He may not have been capable of his full potential, but he was still a force to be reckoned with. The others began firing their blasters, but the bolts hit a barrier in the Force before they had the chance to reach their target. Rey summoned Ben’s lightsaber without a moment of hesitation, wielding it as if it were her own. The creature was weakened, both in the Force and in the physical body he possessed. She had a chance to kill him. With one hand, Sidious pivoted the lightsaber proficiently enough to block her, and, with the other, he began turning the
bolts frozen in air in different directions.

A tremor rippled through the Force, and Ben knew what Sidious aimed to do. Mid-swing, the creature released the bolts. Ben trusted that Rey felt the warning in the Force and dropped to the floor, focusing his attention on catching the bolts aimed at her friends. A bolt caught his shoulder on the way down. It was merely a flesh wound, but it disrupted his connection. As Ben fell to his back, he reached blindly above his head, grasping desperately for the energy in the Force before the bolts met their intended targets.

Finn had recognized the danger as well. Instead of dropping to the ground, he had jumped to cover Rose. Falling short, all he could do was scream, “Rose!”

The harrowing sound echoed down the corridor, long after Ben had fallen to the ground, but he feared what he would see when he looked up. Unable to hold the energy any longer, he turned over and raised his head to discover their fate. Releasing a shuddering exhale, he immediately knew that—while several of the stormtroopers would have taken a direct hit—the one aimed for Rose would have been immediately fatal. The inert beam of plasma hovered centimeters from her face before he manipulated it, as well as the others, changing the trajectory toward the upper level before releasing them with a groan of effort.

Finn was paralyzed in shock as he stared at him. Ben gave a stiff nod, empathizing with the fear that was likely coursing through the man’s veins, then turned his attention toward Rey. She had successfully avoided the bolt and was lying on the floor, her focus on something she held tightly in her fist. Her eyes found his, burning with resolve. Her stare returned to her hand, revealing the partially filled hypo-injector in its center. In between breaths, she squeezed her eyes shut, and his entire world stopped for the second time that day. His hand shot out in a desperate urgency that made him faster than the Force itself. But not fast enough. The empty hypo-injector clattered to the floor at his side.

“No!” He pushed himself from the floor, disbelief, anger, and fear mixing inside him. As he raised his stare to hers, he was shaking uncontrollably. Rey was on her knees, shuddered with tremors mirroring his, but for an entirely different reason.

“If you die, I die,” she said through clenched teeth.

_No. I can’t lose you again. I’m not strong enough._

Ben felt the familiar fire in his veins—that singular focus that drove him to do _anything_ to get what he wanted. And he wanted to destroy Sidious. He moved forward, calling his weapon from her
immobile hand and igniting it. The others broke from their stupor and began firing upon the creature once more. Sidious created another barrier in the Force, but Ben knew it would be difficult for him to split his attention in the Force. As Rey screamed in pain, Ben advanced with his weapon raised to kill. With a wave of the creature’s hands, the blasters scattered in opposite directions and Rey was thrown backward with the Force.

Sidious clearly intended for his former apprentice to abandon his pursuit with the distraction, but Ben didn’t turn to help Rey. With all the anger that coursed through his veins like the lava of Mustafar, he thrust forward with his blade instead. The clone was able to avoid the blade, but the momentum sent him sprawling to the floor; right where Ben could finish him. Ben raised the lightsaber, prepared to bring it down upon the man who had destroyed the lives of everyone he had ever loved. The man who had single-handedly dragged the Skywalker line into darkness, however, would not fall so easily. There was a split-second warning in the Force before blue sparks crackled through the air. Ben flipped the lightsaber vertically as the clone channeled the formidable energy through his fingers. The energized arcs danced down his blade rather than jolting through Ben’s body. Groaning through bared teeth, he tried his best to absorb the brunt of the power threatening to knock him off balance. He knew it was not sustainable.

With a trembling hand, Ben channeled the darkness, gathered it, and released it out his palm, meeting Sidious’s energy with his own. Both the apprentice and his former master held their hands outstretched as lightning arced from their fingertips, coalescing in a blue sphere between them. Ben struggled under its power; he knew Force Lightning was not an ability he was well-practiced in enough to defeat one of the most powerful darksiders in the galaxy. Fighting the effects of the poison was exhausting enough, but he knew if he succumbed to it, he would lose access to the Force. The remaining energy was significant to victory. He would have more time this round—both because he was not bordering death when he was injected and because he hadn’t been able to inject all the poisonous liquid. Ben flipped the lightsaber vertically as the clone channeled the formidable energy through his fingers. The energized arcs danced down his blade rather than jolting through Ben’s body. Groaning through bared teeth, he tried his best to absorb the brunt of the power threatening to knock him off balance. He knew it was not sustainable.

Ben felt a hand on his arm and watched as another blue arc joined his. Rey stood next to him, gritting her teeth through the exertion, her hand outstretched to create lightning of her own. They were building a formidable strength between them that even Sidious would be unable to contend with. The creature’s eyes widened as he felt the combination of their power, then sent an incredible pulse of energy in a final effort. Ben could feel Finn returning with his blaster to assist in surrounding the creature. They had backed Sidious into a corner; they could win. They were achingly close, but it wasn’t enough.

The Force exploded from the sphere, collapsing the corridor underneath it and sending them flying in opposite directions. Ben was grateful that this time he hadn’t been rendered unconscious in the aftermath. He jumped to his feet to discover a large chasm between himself and Sidious. Finn and the six stormtroopers were trapped in the dead-end corridor with Sidious. Rey, Rose, and Blue stood on the other side with Ben. The former stormtroopers immediately opened fire on the former Emperor, as he did his best to return the bolts at them. His focus, however, was on Ben and Rey.
“You made your choice, and so has she,” his former master hissed, tossing Rey’s lightsaber across the chasm, leaving himself defenseless. “Your little girlfriend said her place would always be between you and me. So it will be, Ren, so it will be.”

Ben stared at his former master in confusion, wondering why he had left himself defenseless, when he felt a tremor in the Force. It was a warning. There wasn’t enough time to even reignite his lightsaber. Ben dove out of the way as the indigo blade struck the tile where he had been standing, leaving behind a scorched divot. Ben was wrong. Sidious hadn’t been tearing her mind apart; he’d been forcing his way inside.

“Rey! Stop!” Ben begged as he turned to face her, but he already recognized the darkness in her eyes. Sidious didn’t need to risk his own life to kill Ben when he could use Rey to do it for him. Igniting his lightsaber, Ben knew their only chance was to get back across that chasm.

Rose’s blaster wavered between them as she attempted to determine her true target. Blue released a series of shrill cries. No one understood the change in Rey. No one except Ben; he knew the invasive presence that overpowered her better than anyone.

“Rey, why are you doing this?” Finn shouted across the chasm, avoiding ricochets from the former Supreme Leader.

“It’s Sidious,” Ben ground out as their blades clashed together. “He’s controlling her!”

Having healed Rey, Sidious had forged a connection. He had a direct passage into her mind. When Rey lowered the strong barriers to him, Sidious could control her through her darkness as easily as he had controlled Ben on Mustafar. At his grandfather’s castle, the creature had used Ben’s anger with Rey to twist his thoughts and help control him. Now Sidious had used Rey’s darkness against her as well.

It was all his fault. Ben had provided the fear and anger the darkness fed on—giving Sidious the darkness he required to control her—by injecting the poison into his arm. Sidious knew Ben had injected himself with a fatal dose, but that wasn’t enough. He wanted the "cruelest stroke," and what could be crueller than forcing Rey to kill the people she loved? Or forcing the people she loved to kill her…. Ben raised his blade to defend against Rey’s next strike, calculating the trajectory of his blade as well as hers.

A blastershot echoed in the corridor, but Rey blocked it with ease. It was blue, only a bolt intended
to stun. Ben turned to find Rose, weapon raised, as she aimed for another shot. Rose’s voice trembled in fear. “What do we do?!”

His blade slipped, grazing Rey’s outer arm. Though he could feel her pain over the bond, she didn’t so much as wince. “Whatever you do, don’t hurt her!”

“Sweetheart, it’s me, it’s Ben!” Her response—if he hadn’t ducked—was to nearly decapitate him.

Rey! He tried across the bond. He knew it was no use, her side of the connection was thick and viscous with darkness.

He knew what it felt like to be under Sidious’s control. It was an exhausting power to fight against. His mind had been hazy, illogical under the foreign influence. Thoughts were heavy and muted, like pushing through a thick fog. Emotions and memories were subjugated, consequences irrelevant. It felt like a dream where the only reality was the darkness. It had been easier to surrender, to allow the burn of his muscles to become his truth, to believe the lies Sidious had twisted into reality. The only words that had broken through the fog had been….

“I love you, Rey!” he shouted between parries. “Don’t do this!”

She paused for a moment, almost as if it had broken through to her, too. She shook her head frantically before slicing the blade upward, catching his shoulder. Blue came to his aid, attempting to shock her back under her own control, but she thrust her weapon into his grey side-vent, pushing through into his circuitry.

“Blue!” Ben called for the crying droid, but Rey kicked the astromech away, sending him careening down the corridor.

Ben knew with certainty that she would kill them if given the opportunity, and no matter what they said, they wouldn’t be able to get through to her. The only way he or Rose could stop her was to kill her, and that wasn’t an option. Her only hope was for them to stop Sidious first. Their Dejarik match rapidly approached endgame, and he knew there were only a few moves he had left.

They needed a diversion.

“Finn!” he shouted into the chasm. Smoke billowed up from below, making it impossible to see the
other side. Ben could see him in the Force and could hear his frantic shouts. Ben disengaged his lightsaber and aimed it at the other man’s chest. He trusted in the Force and threw it across the chasm. It disappeared through the smoke, and Ben held his breath until it hit its mark. He could sense the former stormtrooper’s confusion at the surrender of his only weapon.

“You’ll have one shot; it has to be an abdominal strike. He can’t die right away!” he yelled through the smoke. “You may not feel the Force, but it’s inside you! You’ll know when!”

“I know you won’t hurt Rey,” came the answering voice, “but, please Ben, protect Rose!”

When Ben turned back to his fight with Rey, the situation deteriorated quickly. She had turned on Rose. The lightsaber strikes came in quick succession, and he knew from experience that there was only so long Rose could avoid the blade without her own weapon. The problem was that he now lacked a weapon to protect Rose.

“Rey, it’s Rose! Everything will be okay! We can get you and Ben to a medbay. You’ll be fine, but you have to come back to us!” Rey responded with a quick jab with her blade, burning a shallow wound into her side. The next strike nearly cut off her arm. Rose did the best she could to escape, running, ducking, and sliding to avoid having to use her blaster. She was limping due to an apparent injury to the leg, which Ben would swear to Finn had not happened on his watch. If he didn’t find a way to get through to Rey, it could get drastically worse. Rey was backing Rose into a corner, and Rose would be forced to make a choice. Ben couldn’t let that happen.

Blasterfire echoed from the other side, and he could only hope that Finn had moved into position. Ben shoved Rey down the corridor with the Force, sending her sprawling onto her back. He grabbed Rose’s hand and sprinted in the opposite direction.

“Do you trust me?” Ben asked Rose as they approached the chasm.

“Yes!” she shouted back.

“Good. Remember to roll.”

Before she could say a word, Ben grabbed Rose under her arms and slid to a stop, using their momentum to throw her into the smoke. Rose screamed as she flew backward over the chasm, crashing roughly onto the other side. She rolled onto her stomach after landing hard on the blaster at her hip.
Ben knew Rey had recovered from the Force push and was swiftly approaching, her teeth bared, lightsaber in hand. He scanned the corridor for Blue, but the droid had disappeared, likely scared from the attack. Ben backed away from the edge of the chasm a few meters, his senses firing warnings that danger was quickly approaching. Without hesitation, he sprinted toward the flames. Rey was right behind him. Ben could feel her gaining on him as he reached the edge, tapping into the Force to propel him to the other side.

He crashed to the floor ungracefully and quickly rolled, pushing himself up. The jump had transported him into a warzone thick with smoke. The others were firing on Sidious. The former Emperor caught the bolts and sent each one back at them. Rose and Finn stood inside a door on the far side, taking turns firing at the clone. The group had moved back to avoid the bolts firing back at them, but Finn still held Ben’s lightsaber in one hand.

Ben sprinted forward into the fight. He knew Rey wouldn’t be too far behind, and he had to reach the room. There was barely a tremor in the Force before he was jumping out of an errant bolt’s path. He looked up to meet familiar eyes—his own—and knew Sidious had sent it as a warning. If only the creature understood he had no intention of confronting him himself; it was too great of a risk. It could be Mustafar all over again; either he or Rey, or both, would die if Sidious forced his way into his mind.

Ben had nearly reached Force Destiny when he bolted to the right, into the darkness of the adjacent room. He had paced this room during nightcycles when he went on his walks with Blue. He knew how deep it was, where the remote was hidden on the control panel, and the dimensions of the pit. This was it. He had made it inside the room, now he had to wait for the other variables to fall into place. The first one was late.

Red emergency lights flashed in the darkness. The ship’s sirens sounded down the corridor, but otherwise, the darkness was silent and still. He knew this place long before he had seen it in Sidious’s vision. This was where it ended, just as the Force foretold. Sidious may have had the advantage of visions in the World Between Worlds, but Ben had the advantage of preparation. If it was the last thing he did, he would make Sidious pay for his hubris in showing him that vision.

A figure appeared in the entryway, illuminated by a bright, indigo blade. She’s here. He had no weapon, no means to defend himself save for the Force at his fingertips. She did not sprint toward him but slowly stalked, forcing him further into the room. He knew he couldn’t allow her to pin him down that early, because the others were still outside.

Ben stepped backward, around the edge of the pit, inhaling and exhaling harshly as he attempted to prepare himself. He knew Sidious’s weakness, he knew how he had to draw him into the room. The twin blades of her lightsaber disappeared into their chambers as she approached. It reminded
him of when his father had taken him swimming near two fighting Colo Clawfish in the oceans of Naboo. His father had laughed away his fear of them, telling him, “Don’t worry about those, kid. It ain’t the ones you can see that’ll get you, it’s the ones you don’t.” He remembered that later when he watched Bather sharks stalk their prey, the creature’s fin would disappear below the surface, leaving the prey to believe they’d escaped. That, or they’d become so focused on the place where the Bather disappeared that they didn’t notice the attack coming from below.

Ben felt like the prey in that moment, searching the depths of the shadows for the attack he knew would come. He could sense her in the Force drawing closer. He could feel the tendrils of her darkness slithering through the connection. He knew he should shut her out to shut out the darkness, but doing so would be abandoning her. She was nearly upon him. His side ached already, his fists clenched tight as he battled the nerves. He actively fought against the impulse to strengthen the barriers in his mind. Slowing his breathing, he waited.

All at once, his vision was illuminated by indigo. He jumped back when he realized her first strike would be toward his throat, but when she brought the blade back around, he knew this was the moment he had been waiting for. Just as he had on the skyway, he let the blade come. As it met his side, he used the Force to slow its velocity, rendering the strike painful, but otherwise not fatal. He cried out, the pain in his voice echoing through the room as much as it did the Force. There was an excitement that was impossible to miss radiating from his former master. He felt it. Ben ducked as Rey swung for his head, but he popped up with a grin on his lips.

Ben could hear the blasterfire growing louder as the fight drew near. He didn’t have a chance to brace before a wave of Force crashed through the room, demolishing the front wall and leaving a gaping entry and crumbled debris in its wake. Both he and Rey had been thrown from the strength of it, but he knew she had not been knocked unconscious. The lightsaber lay abandoned between them, so he picked it up, standing quickly to avoid her counterattack. As he prepared for her next move, Sidious backed into the room amid the blasterfire.

The former Emperor was no fool. Ben knew he wouldn’t risk walking into an unfriendly room with only a blastdoor as an escape. Sidious was narcissistic, however, and believed that giving himself an open escape would be enough when surrounded inside a room filled with enemies. Ben would use that hubris—and his desire to watch the fall of the last Skywalker—against him. At least, that was his hope. It was his only hope.

It was all too easy. Sidious moved deeper into the room, careful to avoid the deep pit in the floor. Rose and two of the stormtroopers took one side, Finn and the last stormtrooper took the side with Sidious. Ben and Rey had already moved past the pit and the controls, but now that Sidious was in the room, Ben moved back toward them. He stopped under the flashing emergency light over the controls. Taking position at the lefthand side of the controls would give him the most visibility. Ben was exactly where he needed to be. Finn was still several yards from the clone. The former stormtrooper fired relentlessly, each bolt deflected by Sidious. The lightsaber, however, was ignited in Ben’s hand. He was ready, he was waiting. With a clenched fist, Ben pummeled his fist into the wound left by Rey’s lightsaber. It would provide him the needed strength to continue the
fight, but it also released the entirety of the resulting pain into their connection.

As he drew on the darkness for strength, he heard a terrified whisper. “Ben?”

Rey’s voice. She had managed to make it around the right side of the semi-circular panel of controls. He searched her eyes and found the fear piercing through the darkness. When he had drawn on the darkness, he had drawn on her darkness, and the light inside her had responded to his pain. Sidious had lost his hold over her. Her light was too strong for his old master to suppress. Ben pushed harder, taking in more of her darkness. “Rey, it’s me,” he told her as she struggled with the blanket of darkness that suffocated her, “you’re not alone.” More light returned to her eyes, and he knew she was fighting to regain control…and succeeding.

There was little time to celebrate as Ben moved to the control panel. He knew the only way he could distract Sidious enough was if his former master believed he was dying. If he could get through to Rey over the bond, they had a chance. He would have to convince her to struggle over the lightsaber, to hurt him just enough. They would only have one shot at it, and everyone else would have to be in place.

The lights of the waist-high control panel glowed red as he flipped each switch to the “on” position. Rey, sweetheart, I need your help, he pleaded over the bond. Will you trust me? He pushed an image of what he needed her to do through the connection, along with all the light he could muster. I need you. There was still a profound amount of darkness seeping from her side of the bond as she struggled against Sidious’s control. When he looked up into her eyes, however, he found the understanding he was hoping for. As she moved closer, cautiously, he removed the small, black square that served as the machine’s remote ignition. As long as he held it in his hand, Sidious couldn’t destroy it.

“You’re not the real Ben,” she said aloud as she approached.

“I am Ben,” he told her. “I won’t hurt you, Rey,” and though it was intended for another’s ears, he meant it. She stepped forward, pressing the hilt of her lightsaber against his abdomen, just as she had done before under Sidious’s control.

“You’ll die for what you did. Any last words?” He could feel Sidious’s attention shift from the fight to the two Force-sensitives. Everything was going according to plan.

Until it wasn’t.
“Yes,” the clone hissed. “Kill him.” The blasts across the room were silenced as the clone reached his hand toward the others. They all fell to the floor, clawing at their throats. Ben could feel the swell of power in the Force; he knew their airways were being crushed under the power of the Force at their throats. It seemed Sidious wanted to ensure he wouldn’t miss the little performance between Ben and Rey. Every other plan he considered in those waning seconds wasn’t good enough. Without the others, they couldn’t beat him.

A powerful swell in the Force seemed to be the final blow in his plan. Rey’s eyes met Ben’s, and he knew she felt the warning as well. Those in the room who were not sensitive to the Force would still have known something was amiss as the violent tremors shuddered through the ship.

*The reactor.*

Either the fire or an explosion had reached the reactor control room or the reactor itself. It had compromised the containment of the hypermatter annihilation. While Ben didn’t understand the complexities of how the reactor functioned as Rey did, he did know that reactor destabilization was fatal to a ship and its passengers. Everything he sensed in the Force told him that the destabilization was imminent. He estimated a minute or less before the ship, and everyone aboard, was torn to pieces. It didn’t matter what they did; death was inevitable.

Staring into her eyes, Ben couldn’t suppress the tears that pooled as he realized he had failed her. She would die, but at least they would go into the beyond together. He tried his best to give her a reassuring smile, but it was likely betrayed by the stray tear that warmed his cheek. *This is how it ends.* The struggle for her friends would soon be over. There was comforting relief that Sidious would go down with them.

His relief was short-lived, however, when he felt the invasive clawing in his mind. Evidently, his former master did not share his fatalist sentiment. Sidious was losing control of Rey, so he changed tactics. In those last moments, he took control of the man he knew he could overpower. It didn’t seem to matter to him that they would all die anyway. Ben knew why he was doing this; Sidious wanted Ben’s last act to be an act of evil. He wanted Ben to kill the woman he loved.

By leaving the bond open, and drawing in her darkness, Ben had left himself vulnerable. He had unwittingly given Sidious everything he needed to control him. No. As the darkness seeped through his defenses, he realized he still held her weapon. With a flash of fear, he meant to drop it, but his hand was compelled to clench around the hilt. Sidious’s hijack of his system had already begun; they were running out of time. His finger moved for the switch. “Ben?” Rey’s eyes frantically studied his, and he knew she found the darkness—and the war—within them. “You have to fight this.”

Rey struggled to pull the lightsaber from him, but his grip remained firm. They both had learned
the hard way what would happen if they used the Force. With darkness surging through his veins, she couldn’t rip it from his grasp. His rational thoughts grew heavy with the invasive viscosity of the darkness, his body moving against his will. He pressed forward until the hilt was also pressed against her abdomen. The Force was screaming inside him, but the strength of the darkness was too powerful. “You can do this, Ben; I believe in you,” she murmured.

He could hear Sidious laughing, could hear the others struggling for breath, could see Rey closing her eyes in preparation…. No, that wasn’t what she was doing. Ben could feel a strength in the Force he had never felt in anyone before. He winced, expecting a powerful blow, but her attention was directed elsewhere. It was enough to give him the smallest bit of control again.

Her power surged further, and he knew without closing his eyes to follow the energy the monumental burden she had attempted to undertake. Rey had trusted him not to hurt her because she was wholly focused on saving the ones she loved. He felt the incredible surge of energy from the reactor; it consumed his senses. But Rey, with clenched teeth and a primal scream, was overpowering the explosive energy of the reactor entirely on her own. This was no exploding lightsaber, however. It shouldn’t have been possible to contain that kind of energy—but not for her. She had something no one else would have had in her place: hope.

She had hope in the impossible…and it wasn’t a weakness. It gave him hope. Her hope would save them all, and they would save the galaxy. The light he felt with that hope was enough to stave off his surrender to the darkness. It broke through the despair and helplessness that darkness had convinced him was reality, and he found the strength to withdraw his thumb from the switch on the lightsaber. His hand still grasped the weapon beyond his control, but it was loosening, he was fighting it. For a moment, he thought it was possible; he thought he could win against the darkness.

*Kill her.*

The words triggered an immediate fear that was devoured by the darkness. He couldn’t remember why he had hope in the first place. Sidious was too strong; what chance did they have? Rey shook under the explosive power she wielded and controlled, trying to give them all one last chance—but she was fighting to find the strength of the light. Sidious wasn’t finished; Ben’s thoughts were growing darker, and he feared Sidious still held control of her as well.

Rey’s life depended upon the battle inside them, the battle they had faced their entire lives, the battle between the darkness and the…light. He couldn’t fight the darkness, but he could trust in the light he had never been capable of eradicating. Maybe it would be enough. He thought of his love for her, her love for him, and pushed all of his remaining light into the bond.

Grasping her hand in his, he opened the bond fully so she could draw on his light. He knew the consequences. If she drew on his light, he would only become further immersed in the darkness.
He would give her everything he had. Ben knew he would succumb to it, and she would have to stop him. But if she was strong enough to fight it, if she achieved the impossible, then Sidious could still fall. As the light left him, he felt her strength grow. His mind grew heavy and clouded, but he focused on one singular thought, one last tendril of light in the darkness—*her*.

He sensed her weakening in the Force, but he also felt the tide change against her grueling battle with the reactor. She was...succeeding. Not only was she containing the reaction, but with both hands outstretched, he watched through the Force as she manipulated that explosive energy and stilled the reactions. With the hypermatter particles no longer crashing into one another, the reactor not only stabilized but shut down entirely.

*She did it.*

Rey had given them one last shot.

Sidious must have come to the same realization, because a blast of lightning arced off the floor toward his bondmate. With all the strength she had left, Rey moved her focus from the reactor to the lightning, grasping onto the energy and containing it. Ben knew it was only a temporary solution. With the power she used to contain the reactor, there was only so much lightning she could wield. As Rey battled with the clone, one hand outstretched, one hand on the lightsaber between them, Ben felt the invasion of his mind increase ten-fold.

The clone stared at them intently. “Do it,” he commanded. “Give yourself over to the power of the darkness. Fulfill...your...destiny.” He would do it; he would fall to the creature’s command—he could *feel* it. They had run out of time.

*Rey?*

*I need your help, I don’t know how long I can hold this; it hurts.*

*I know, sweetheart. But I can’t help you; he’s in my head. I don’t know how much longer I can hold this, either.*

Her attention flickered from the lightning to stare into his eyes. He knew she saw the darkness within him. *Fight it, Ben.*
I can’t do it. You need to stop me. Her eyes searched his with a sudden desperation. He saw the slight quiver in her lip, the despair that twisted through her expression, and he knew she understood. As his vision blurred, he pushed the image of what he needed her to do into the bond.

No! I won’t do it. I won’t kill you!

Then I will kill you. And Rose. And Finn. And Sidious will win. You saw that vision. Do it!

You do what you have to do, Ben. Either kill me or hold on. But I refuse to believe that our future is set! Her eyes were resolute, holding his gaze for one more moment before turning back to focus on the lightning. She was convinced his destiny wasn’t preordained, but he hoped it was. It would be their only hope.

A red blur in his peripheral caught his attention. It was his lightsaber. Finn hadn’t given up. Still struggling for air, he had been crawling with the last of his strength to reach the clone. Ben’s head snapped to Rose, who crouched on her knees on the other side of the pit. Then his eyes trailed down to the lightsaber, his thumb on the trigger, shaking under Sidious’s control.

Kill her.

The darkness burrowed further into his mind, but that didn’t stop the whisper of a realization.

Never trust anyone, Sidious had once told him. Kylo hadn’t trusted anyone, ever, but Ben did. He trusted in Poe and Rose and Finn—especially Finn—enough that Ben had put the fate of the galaxy—of Rey—in their hands. This was it.

Kill her.

The darkness was too thick to fight for long. As intensely as he struggled against it, Ben knew he would lose the battle soon. In his waning strength, he unclenched his fist to reveal the ignition remote in his hand. Rose’s eyes met his as if he had called out to her. Sidious’s control was focused on the hand that held the saber, and he hoped that one last fight against the darkness would be enough. With as much strength as he could muster with the Force, Ben tried to break free of the darkness long enough to throw the remote to Rose. His hand responded to his will, but it was not quite enough.
In the last second, his arm jerked back under the command of the darkness. The remote left his hand, but the trajectory was off. It clattered to the ground, bouncing across the floor and over the edge of the pit. As it fell into the darkness, deft fingers wrapped around the switch. Lying on her stomach, leaning into the pit, Rose grasped the remote with her hand outstretched.

She pulled it to her chest and turned over onto her back, hand on the ignition as she slowly lost consciousness. This was it. This was their chance.

**Kill her.**

*No.*

**Kill her.**

Yes, kill her….

*No!*

Ben’s eyes fell to the lightsaber between him and Rey. He struggled with the last of his strength to fight against the darkness calling him. His finger hesitated on the trigger; forward would ignite the chamber pointed toward her, back would ignite the chamber pointed toward him, the middle pressed down would ignite both. “You have to stop me, Rey, *please.*”

“No!” Rey cried over the effort of containing the incredible energy of the lightning. Ben closed his eyes, focusing on Rose’s and Finn’s energy in the Force.

**Kill her. Now.**

It was difficult to focus; he felt as if he were flickering in and out of consciousness.

*Now,* he tried to push into their minds. He knew they wouldn’t hear him, but he was hoping if they were intuitive enough in the Force they would sense it. Ben could feel all the pieces coming together, if he only had the strength to hold off Sidious for a few seconds longer. In the Force, he sensed Rey weakening in containing the lightning Sidious unleashed with relentless brutality. The
darkness grew thicker around his mind as he fought every impulse to press the trigger forward.

*Kill her.*

A flash of Rey at his mercy in the throne room replayed in his mind. This time, Sidious wouldn’t be defeated by a manipulation of his thoughts. This time, he would force Ben to do what he had been commanded to do before. Sidious gaining control over him, of forcing him to kill her, was not a risk, it was an eventuality. Ben would fall to darkness, and so would she to his hand. His eyes found hers.

*Kill her.*

*No.*

“You know what I have to do,” he rasped, searching her stare for understanding. This was it; the Force had shown them *this* moment so they could defeat Sidious.

Ben could sense Finn struggling to his knees behind the dark-haired monster. Unfortunately, so did Sidious. It was now or never. He fought his body to respond as his defenses fell to his former master. There was only one way to distract Sidious enough. Ben raised the barriers in his mind as best he could. With a flick of the dwindling Force inside him, he dragged his thumb back from its position on the trigger. He pulled Rey into him, resting the fate of the galaxy in the hands of the Resistance. He felt the monster turn his attention toward them. With a victorious smile, he groaned as her lips found his.

*Checkmate.*
Chapter End Notes

Violence

Violent acts against many characters
Finn's Revenge

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Finn was not Force-sensitive; he had never felt a mystic energy calling to him, telling him what was right. That didn’t mean he didn’t believe in the Force. He faced a man who looked identical to Ben Solo, formerly known as Kylo Ren, with the soul of the dead Supreme Leader, who was actually the reincarnated Emperor. It was difficult to comprehend; then again, it had been explained to him by the man who had been able to touch his best friend—whose mind was currently being controlled through the Force—from across the galaxy, as if he was in the room. If Finn had accepted all of that, then he could believe that Force could call to him.

If Ben told him that he could do this, that this was their one shot to save his family, then Finn would trust it. He would trust him. Finn was trusting him with the lives of the two people he loved most, after all. Even without a weapon, Ben had the Force. Finn knew he would protect Rey at all costs. He believed that Ben would do everything he could to protect Rose as well; he was the only reason she was alive. There was no room for debate that his fiancée would have been killed by that blaster bolt if Ben hadn’t risked his injury to intervene. He knew Ben would lay down his life for any of them. His only fear was what Ben would do if he had to choose between them.

Finn shook the thought from his mind. He had a mission that he couldn’t fail; the lightsaber burned in his hand in his desire to wield it. He’d always allowed his intuition to guide him, and if Ben suggested that was the Force, then he would follow its guidance. In his hatred for the man who stood blocking blaster bolts with ease, Finn wanted to sprint screaming at him from the second Ben’s lightsaber touched his hand, but he waited. As the other troopers fired upon the former Supreme Leader, Finn circled behind him. He fired his blaster in hope that he wouldn’t draw suspicion, but he was waiting for the perfect moment to move in. He hoped there would be a sign.

Rose was brought back to him via a quick flight through the smoke. His woman tumbled to the ground before him, immediately picking up the blaster to fight. They took shelter in a room as the clone sent every bolt they shot at him straight back at them. Finn watched as one of the other troopers fell, and he wondered if that would be the reward for all of their loyalty. He had never been the one for others to look to—the leader—but he felt all of their eyes on him now. It seemed they had reached an impasse until Ben came tumbling through the smoke. He ducked into an adjacent room, which Finn assumed was for cover until Rey jumped through the smoke and stalked in after him. Finn knew Ben wasn’t foolish enough to back himself into a corner unless he wanted to be there.

His presumptions were confirmed when the clone halted all the blasterfire, his attention fleetingly diverted to something the rest of them couldn’t see, something that had occurred in the direction of Ben and Rey. “Yes!” The clone hissed, and Finn tried not to allow his mind to wander to what could have happened. With a twitch of his hand, the creature allowed all of the hovering bolts to
crash into the wall of the room simultaneously. The wall exploded inward, and Sidious waved his arm to tear down the rest before stepping in the room himself. Finn reluctantly followed, hoping Ben was still standing.

Rey had backed Ben into the darkness, but Finn could see their silhouetted forms every time the emergency lights flashed. Ben was weaponless, and though he couldn’t see the light from Rey’s lightsaber, Finn wondered how long the former Knight could hold her off. There was nothing Finn could do as he followed the clone around a three-meter-wide hole in the floor. Sidious was speaking to Rey—or Ben—he couldn’t hear it over the blasterfire and sirens. What he did know was, from his limited perspective, Ben and Rey seemed to be struggling over her lightsaber. The clone was distracted by their struggle, and it seemed like it could be his chance. He had hope…

…until a pressure around his throat brought him to his knees.

Finn glanced across the pit to see Rose on the ground, too. He didn’t have to search for the other troopers to know they were in similarly dire circumstances. Everything in him wanted to crawl to his beautiful fiancée, but he knew what he had to do. Ben was still on his feet; Finn had a mission to complete. There was a deep tremor in the floor, and the grip around his throat loosened minimally. He knew that if it caused an entire Star Destroyer to tremble, it was something very, very bad. None of them were likely making it off the ship alive. If they died trying to save the galaxy, well, then it was a death worth suffering.

It was still a struggle to breathe, but he found the strength to crawl toward the clone. The lightsaber was ignited in his hand, its vibrations traveling up his arm as he pushed forward. Finn didn’t dare look to his Rose or Rey or Ben, because his will to fight was dependent upon his belief that they were all still alive. His sights were focused on the raven-haired clone, whose face was turned as he arced lightning at Rey, which she was gathering like a ball of energy into her hand. As he moved within striking distance, Finn had begun to wonder whether he would feel the guidance from the Force.

It wasn’t until Ben threw an object to Rose that he felt that familiar prickling on the back of his neck. She barely caught it as it tumbled over the side of the pit, but when she pulled it up, her eyes met his. Her finger moved to the button and she nodded at him, before rolling to her back. Finn had no idea what that button would do, or whether it was a death sentence for all of them. What he presumed was that it controlled something inside that pit, and he had to make sure the former Emperor fell into it wounded, but still alive.

The tremors around them had all but disappeared. Finn felt hope as he pushed himself up onto his knees, the world around him moving in and out of focus as his body began to shut down. The prickling on the back of his neck grew stronger, and time slowed to a crawl. He suddenly had a feeling that whatever was supposed to happen had to happen right then. A terrible feeling started to trickle through him, but he shut it away. There was no time for second-guessing.
The creature either didn’t see Finn behind him, or he underestimated him as a threat. Just as Finn raised the blade, the pressure around his throat was released. Sidious’s hands had fallen to his sides, his eyes alight in a wicked mirth; a bloody, predatory smile crossing his torn face. Fighting the urge to fall forward and gasp for breath, Finn directed all the strength left in his body into the lightsaber instead. The energy from the blade vibrated through his bones. He grit his teeth in an effort to wield it, thrusting it forward in a powerful strike. He could almost see it, almost feel it, in the seconds before the blade hit its mark.

The blade experienced a surprisingly limited amount of resistance as it pierced through the clone’s body. As he ripped the crackling weapon from Sidious’s body, the momentum dragged the creature backward…and into the pit. Finn’s eyes locked with Rose, and he knew she understood—it was time. Finn wondered what to do if the creature tried to escape or formed a counterattack. Ben had made it clear that his injuries could not be fatal, but Finn had heard legends, this man was one of the most powerful men in the galaxy. He held the weapon anxiously, waiting for what came next. I hope you’re right, Ben.

He didn’t have to wait long. Looking over the edge into the three-meter-deep hole that held the former Emperor, he saw the man collapsed on his side. Crimson surrounded him as he quickly bled out through a rupture in his wound. Sidious was not focused on him, however, but on the struggle between Ben and Rey. He only hoped once this creature died, it would end the control he had over Rey. There was an evil grin plastered on the clone’s split face. It made him more terrifying than Kylo Ren had ever been.

“You fools!” The clone laughed as he pushed himself to a stand. “You should have killed me!”

The creature was still laughing when a strange chemical sprayed from the sides, enveloping him in a cloud of mist. Finn stumbled backward from the hole; the temperature blowing up was near freezing. When the mist cleared, the former Emperor was gone. In his place was a grey, rectangular slab. In the center was the creature’s likeness, the smile still plastered on his face.

His eyes flashed to Rose, whose fingers still depressed the button on the remote. “Rose?” he shouted into the darkness, “what just—”

The words were lost to the stars as the floor fell out from under him.
Chapter End Notes

Violent acts against many characters
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

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Rey felt as if she were emerging from a dream. “Ben?”

There was darkness, so much darkness clouding her thoughts. But in the center of it all, there was
a light. “Rey, it’s me,” a familiar voice told her. She felt the darkness melting away from her mind, releasing her from its bonds. “You’re not alone.” Those words…a glimpse of a hand touching another, illuminated by fire flashed through her mind. That sparked a flood of memories, along with fear of who had suppressed them. The Finalizer. Ben. Sidious.

She quickly scanned their surroundings. She was in a room with Ben and her friends and…Sidious. They were standing next to a control panel, and Ben was focused on flipping the red-illuminated switches. This wasn’t Force Destiny, but he was readying a machine, she realized. Rey could feel the monster still clawing at her mind in the extensive darkness that still shadowed her thoughts, but there was just enough light to contend with it.

*Rey, sweetheart, I need your help,* she heard over the bond. *Will you trust me?*

An image entered her mind of her pressing the lightsaber to his abdomen as she had in the Force illusion by Sidious. She saw herself threatening to ignite it, enough to distract the monster so Finn could thrust his lightsaber through him. She hoped Ben was certain that the threat of his death would be sufficient enough distraction for Finn to get close enough. *I need you,* he whispered. If he thought this was their shot, then she trusted him. She met his eyes and hoped he saw the concordance in them.

She watched him remove a small, square remote from the control panel as she stepped closer. “You’re not the real Ben,” she said, playing her part. She could feel Sidious’s attention focus on them.

“I am Ben,” he said, “I won’t hurt you, Rey.” It was the truth; she could see it in his eyes. That wasn’t the part that terrified her. She had seen this before. Her gaze shifted to Sidious, meeting the familiar eyes with unfamiliar emotions in them. His knowing smile was worse. This was the vision he had shown her. Rey focused her stare on Ben and hoped he saw in hers that she would never hurt him, either, even if that was what she had to convince the monster she would do. The vision was wrong. It had to be wrong. She stepped forward, pressing the hilt of her lightsaber against his abdomen. She tried to suppress the fear that shuddered through her as she did.

“You’ll die for what you did,” she spat, imagining it was Sidious at her mercy. “Any last words?”

“Yes,” the clone hissed. “Kill him.” The blasterfire that had surrounded them fell instantly silent. Though every cell in her body ached to, she knew she couldn’t glance back at her friends. She could sense them in the Force, however. They had all dropped to the floor, writhing, grasping at their throats. She knew what Sidious had done. It took everything in her not to react. Her friends needed her, so she channeled her fear and anger into her performance.
Her performance was abandoned, however, when she felt a violent shudder and then a powerful swell in the Force. Her eyes met Ben’s. From the fear in them, she knew he understood the precarious situation as well as she did. *The hypermatter-annihilation reactor.* Something catastrophic had compromised the containment of hypermatter particles inside the reactor. It was destabilizing. If the hypermatter particles that crashed into each other to create the incredible amounts of energy to power and propel a durasteel city through space were no longer contained, it would create an explosion similar in energy to Starkiller. If she didn’t do something, they would all die. Her eyes scanned the room in panic as she formulated a plan. Her eyes caught those of the monster, and he must have seen something in the darkness still clouding her vision. His lips curled into a sneer.

*He knows.*

That wasn’t what made her blood run cold, however. No, what truly unsettled her was when that sneer transformed into a grin. Then her bondmate’s finger moved for the switch on the lightsaber. “Ben?”

She raised her stare in terror, knowing what she would find. The last time she had seen such extensive darkness in him, he had nearly killed her on Mustafar. She saw the conflict within him; she knew the struggle he faced. Sidious had found his way in and he would soon have control. “You have to fight this,” she begged.

Ben wanted to, she could see it in his eyes, but his grip tightened on the hilt. She tried to physically wrench it from his grasp, but his hold was steadfast. She didn’t dare try to take her lightsaber from him through the Force again. He was fighting, but it wasn’t enough. He stepped forward until the hilt was pressed between them. The Force was alight in warning, but she couldn’t discern where the immediate danger was. Her bondmate? Or the reactor? “You can do this, Ben, I believe in you.” She had to trust him. Either he would kill her, or the reactor would kill them all.

Rey sank deeper into the Force, following the passageways and corridors to the containment vessel in the belly of the ship. Inside, she found the reactor. It wouldn’t have taken someone knowledgeable in reactors to recognize the problem. The heavily reinforced containment vessel had been compromised by a targeted Resistance strike. Rey watched ships and fighters of all makes and sizes engaged in an impressive starfight through a massive hole in the outer wall. As a result of the damage, the containment structure was struggling to pressurize.

The hypermatter-annihilation reactor was housed in its own superstructure, detached from the remainder of the ship. Hypermatter were Tachyon particles that were found in planetary cores exposed to solar radiation or were gathered on the hull of ships during hyperspace travel. In realspace, these particles accelerated to infinite speeds. When propelled into each other inside the reactor core, annihilating them, the reaction created immense quantities of energy. This heated, high-pressure energy could be stored in temperature and pressure regulated cells attached to the
reactor, and later used for power and propulsion.

The negative pressure caused by the breach of the outer wall had created a chain reaction of depressurization in the core, which resulted in depressurization in the containment cells. The energy in the containment cells was already expanding beyond controllable levels due to the negative pressure in the room. With no pressure on the valves, the energy began leaking from the cells back into the reactor, causing a destabilization of energy in the core.

Once the energy inside the reactor reached levels beyond the containment limit of the housing, the highly pressurized energy would inevitably break through the weakest section of the reactor housing. That would result in the explosion of the reactor core. The explosive energy would propel hypermatter and debris outward at infinite speeds. Essentially, the reactor had become a ticking bomb with the explosive power of the sun.

The destabilization had already begun. Even if the reactor could have been shut down after reaching catastrophic heat and pressure levels, most of the controls had been compromised by the impact in the outer wall and the following depressurization. There was nothing she could do to stop the chain reaction that had already commenced. But she could try to contain it. Unfortunately, this was worlds more complicated than suppressing an explosion in a lightsaber.

*I can do this. I can do this.*

Energy swelled in the reactor core, and she knew an explosive reaction was imminent. The faces of Finn, Rose and Ben flashed through her mind. There was no other option; either she contained it or they would die. She would as well, but the thought of losing them was what set her will. She would save them all or die trying. Raising her hands, she created a domed Force shield around the reactor. She poured more and more energy into it, reinforcing it with everything she had. A blinding white flash filled the Force as energy burst from within the core. She braced against the explosion, her throat raw from her screams of exertion.

The energy pushed outward against her Force shield, expanding the dome under the power of the explosion. Fundamentally, she was attempting to harness the power of the sun. *Her.* Rey Nobody from Nowhere. Who was she to believe she could wield that kind of power? Ben had told her that attempting to halt an entire Star Destroyer would kill her; what would happen if she attempted to halt what powered it? What would happen if she succeeded in containing it? Once she released the shield, would the core explode?

Rey could feel herself weakening as she continued to reinforce the shield, hoping it would be strong enough to contain the explosive energy. That was all she had: hope. Her body began shaking under the effort, but she just dug deeper, searched for more light inside herself. *Please,* she begged the Cosmic Force, *Luke…Leia…Han…Anakin…Dev…please, somebody…help me.*
With all the strength of the light inside her, she pushed back against the energy in the reactor. There was a warmth over the bond, light, and then a large hand grasped her arm. She jolted and, in her surprise, absorbed some of the energy. Bracing herself, with one hand she absorbed the energy and with the other used it to suppress the explosion. The energy began flooding through her uninhibited.

Drawing on her light and his, she found the strength to remain standing under the power that flowed through her. It was almost intuitive, how she drew on his light for strength. The bond was open, fully. She could feel the extent of his darkness, but she could also feel the depth of his love for her. The light in her own heart bloomed. She would do this, she had to, so she could experience that love for the rest of her life.

Rey felt the struggle turn in her favor. It was working; the energy she was absorbing was not only containing the explosion, it was suppressing it. When she had absorbed the last of the explosive energy, she redirected it out the massive hole in the outer wall. The reactor had stopped firing as a result of the destabilization or explosion—likely a failsafe that had been ineffective to contain the explosion—but would help return the reactor to a stable condition.

Once she absorbed and redirected the explosive energy, the depressurization of the containment cells was still critical, there was still a leak, but there was no longer an immediate threat of an explosion. With the hypermatter particles no longer crashing into one another in the core, there was nothing for the leaked energy to destabilize. The reactor was not only “stable”—or at least as stable as it could be—but it was shut down entirely.

Rey barely had enough time to open her eyes and reacquaint herself with the room before she felt another warning in the Force. There was the vibration of electricity in the air before she heard the crackle of Force lightning. She reached the hand that had absorbed the energy from the reactor and began absorbing the lightning instead. The monster growled at the display and increased the strength of the arcs. Her focus was split between the reactor and the lightning that was quickly draining what little strength she had left.

Rey could feel the heat of the clone’s stare, but it was no longer focused on her. “Do it,” he commanded. “Give yourself over to the power of the darkness. Fulfill…your…destiny.”

Rey? Ben’s voice rasped over the bond.

I need your help, she begged. I don’t know how long I can hold this; it hurts.
I know, sweetheart. But I can’t help you; he’s in my head. I don’t know how much longer I can hold this, either.

Ben’s arms were shaking in his struggle for control, but she didn’t feel the darkness from him she expected. She found his stare in the dimly lit room, and his eyes painted a darker picture. He was fully submerged, drowning in darkness, struggling to find the surface to catch his breath. It was only then that Rey realized that their bond remained fully open. As she absorbed the powerful energy of the lightning, she continued to draw on his light as well as hers for strength. He was giving her everything he had, and he was succumbing to the trap Sidious had set. Her fear intensified. Instead of raising the barriers between him to stop it, she pushed into his mind instead, searching for his connection to the conscious world. She might have to drag him off that ship unconscious, but that was better than losing him to darkness.

Ben or Sidious had anticipated her. When she attempted to sever the connection, a push in the Force blocked her. She tried again, but her attempts were parried by his energy. She pulled away from his mind. Thick, heavy darkness spilled over into the connection. There was no more light flowing into the bond…. She was losing him.

Fight it, Ben.

I can’t do it. You need to stop me. An image of her worst nightmare appeared over the bond. He was asking her to use the lightsaber against him.

No! I won’t do it. I won’t kill you!

Then I will kill you. And Rose. And Finn. And Sidious will win. You saw that vision. Do it!

You do what you have to do, Ben, she told him, resolved to put her fate in the hands of the Force. Either kill me or hold on. But I refuse to believe that our future is set. She held his dark stare for one more moment to make it clear to him that what he asked of her was not an option, then she turned back to focus on containing the lightning. She knew Ben couldn’t hold on much longer. Her free hand dropped to the lightsaber between them, struggling in vain to wrench it from his grasp.

His hold was steadfast, but she felt the struggle within him. Ben wasn’t lost, not yet. She couldn’t lose hope; it was all they had left. Though his eyes were black pools of darkness, he unclenched his free hand to reveal the remote to the machine. There was still hope. Only Ben didn’t push the button; he tossed it over their heads. She heard it clatter to the floor behind her. It was their last chance, and he had thrown it away. Then she heard his voice over the bond.
Yes, kill her… no!

She groaned under the exertion of containing the lightning while struggling with Ben for the weapon. *Fight it, Ben, please.* Rey searched for her friends in the Force. Rose was lying on the floor, possibly unconscious, and Finn was crawling, fighting for breath. They were dying, she had to help them. Sidious had them trapped. She knew that, but she held onto the hope that they could find a way. Her friends were suffocating, she was losing Ben, Sidious would eventually overpower her, but everything inside her screamed to hold on. There was only one alternative, a choice she knew Sidious would force her to make: attempt to save Ben and kill them all, or kill Ben and save her friends.

“*You have to stop me, Rey,*” he begged as if he had heard her thought. His voice was edged with darkness. “*Please.*”

“No!”

His eyes were fixed on the lightsaber between them; his finger hesitated on the trigger, trembling as he tried to stop himself from pushing it forward. He closed his eyes, and Rey knew she had to make a decision. Would she let him kill her, or would she do what was necessary to stop him? She knew what the Jedi would do—they would protect the greater good. If she stopped him, she would become the Jedi the galaxy wanted her to be.

Something in her, something she couldn’t explain, screamed, *wait, have patience,* but she could feel him raise the barriers in his mind. She felt her body sway as she straddled the line of unconsciousness; she couldn’t hold this energy any longer. But Rey had something that creature hadn’t counted on. *Hope.* And as long as she had hope, she would fight.

*I won’t give up on you,* she promised him. *Ever.*

“*Then you know what I have to do,*” he rasped, and she knew he had lost the battle.

They all had.

The onslaught of lightning ceased a split second before she released the energy at Sidious. He grit his teeth as he weathered it, but the creature remained standing. Ben had said his powers were muted in the clone’s body, but he looked as strong as ever to Rey. If this was him at his weakest,
what could he do to the galaxy if they failed to stop him from his plans? How could they stop him? If he lived, he won. If he died... his still won. What could any of them do to survive this, when his attention was focused solely on gaining access to the mind of the only person who had any knowledge of how to defeat him? It seemed hopeless.

Then a crimson glow caught her attention. It was Finn. He had crawled his way to Sidious. As Finn stood, she felt a warning in the Force. She turned to her bondmate, fearing the worst, but was surprised when he pulled her into him. He must have seen it too, because in the pervasive darkness of his mind, she could only sense one word—distraction.

Her mind stalled in shock. Only after he breathed against her lips did she realize he was kissing her. It was the most consequential moment of their lives; the galaxy was in danger, he was drowning in darkness, but she trusted him. She surged forward, deepening the kiss, her heart soaring at his touch. He was warm against her, his heart thrumming strongly against her chest. His right arm wrapped around her back, holding her to him. Tears fell from her eyes at how whole, how perfect, she felt in his arms. She didn’t care where she was; they were together, and that was all that mattered.

He pulled away to whisper on her lips, “We did it.”

His words sounded broken, heavy with emotion. Her eyes fluttered open to take in first, his kiss-swollen lips, then the shine in his soul-baring eyes. Eyes that were pained in every way she supposed a person could be pained.

“No,” the creature hissed behind her. “This is impossible. I saw it.”

*Visions,* Kylo chuckled darkly across their bond. *Gifts from the Force…and curses.*

Rey turned to see Sidious impaled by Ben’s lightsaber, the weapon wielded by her best friend. The clone fell backward into the pit in the floor, his body crashing into the bottom with a loud thud.

The sound of his twisted laugh echoed up from the pit.

She turned to face him, the man she hated more than any other. He had tortured and abused her bondmate and his grandfather, manipulated their thoughts, turned them against their family and their true selves, and used them until they were empty shells of the men they once were. He had nearly destroyed the man she grew to love. With all the energy she had left, she gathered the Force
in her hand and held the creature in stasis. Sidious fought back against the stasis, but she was steadfast in her resolution. Her powers were weakened, but she would hold him until she was no longer physically capable. That creature wouldn’t escape again, they would make him pay. She moved to join Finn at the edge of the pit, but Ben’s voice in her head stopped her.

*The button, Rose. Press the button.*

Rey turned toward where her friend lay collapsed on the ground. As if Rose had heard him, her fingers moved around the black remote. She could practically hear Sidious’s taunting words of weakness and destiny as Ben collapsed against the control panel in exhaustion. Sidious continued to laugh as he slowly overcame the stasis. Something in the Force told her he would be too late. He was underestimating them… again. It would be the last time. With bared teeth, Rose squeezed her fingers against the button.

“*You fools!*” Sidious laughed from the bottom of the machine. “*You should have killed me!*”

*No,* Ben answered in the Force. *If you died, you would be in our minds again. You would have the World Between Worlds. You would still have the remaining Force Destiny to give you life. You could still create your Dark Army. But now…* Rey could feel the understanding and fear in the monster’s energy as a heavy mist blasted from the sides of the machine. *Now you’re a prisoner in your own mind… just like I was.*

When Rey realized the creature was no longer fighting against her, she released her hold in exhaustion.

*What is it?* She asked Ben.

*Carbonite.*

She didn’t know what Ben planned to do with it, but as long as the former Emperor remained frozen in Carbonite, it was over. She would have laughed in relief if the floor hadn’t chosen that moment to groan and tilt precariously. Rey turned to scan the room behind her as the floor fell away from underneath their feet. She and Ben fell straight down to the floor below, but the Carbonite machine crashed through that floor and continued down in its momentum, dragging the front half of the room with it. By the time Rey had reached the edge of the hole, the Carbonite slab and her friends had fallen several more floors into a pit of fire that had been eating away at most of the structure.
“No!” Rey reached for her friends in panic, grasping for each of their energies. She strained under the exertion of capturing the slab, her friends, and the remaining stormtroopers, but she managed it in her desperation, halting their fall. It would require too much energy to bring them back up to her, especially after the energy she had exerted to stabilize the reactor, but she was able to pull them to safety.

“Finn! Are you all right?”

It took a moment for him to respond as she searched for them in the darkness. “Yeah, we’re all okay! Are you?”

“We’re fine!” she said, turning back to check on Ben. He was lying on his back, but they had both fallen on a flat surface, so she wasn’t concerned. “Do you have the Carbonite?”

“Yeah, we do!” He answered, and she could hear the smile in his voice. After everything they had been through together, the first thing she wanted to do when she saw him again was hug him until he couldn’t breathe.

“Take it with you! Get it on the Falcon; we’ll meet you down there!” She couldn’t help the feeling that it was all too easy. How many floors down had they landed? Were they surrounded by fire? Were they injured? Or was she so jaded that she couldn’t imagine a moment when nothing would be wrong?

“Rey, this side of the ship is too unstable,” Finn’s voice echoed from the darkness, breaking her from her thoughts. “And you’ll have to take two turbolifts to reach us. The likelihood of the upper turbolift being shut down in emergency procedures is pretty good. It’s too risky for you to go that way. I know a way down from here; we’ll be fine, but you two should take an emergency shuttle. They’re closer to you and away from the fire. Once you’ve launched, set course to the far side of Ilum, and I’ll pick you up there!”

Rey couldn’t help but smile. Her best friend knew the layout of the ship better than anyone, especially the escape shuttles. “I’ll see you out there then!”

“Be careful, Rey! Go straight to the escape shuttles!”

Rey turned back to Ben. Finn was right, they needed to get out of there. Her fears began to return as
she remembered another reason why they were pressed for time; the poison Ben had injected himself with was still coursing through his veins.

Can he walk?

She was relieved to find that Ben had moved. He sat propped up against a pile of debris, his hands resting on his abdomen, his head tilted forward as he stared at the floor. His thoughts were firmly protected by the raised barriers in his mind, which felt unfamiliar considering she hadn’t felt them since Mustafar. His shoulders shuddered with what she first thought were sobs but soon realized was a dark, humorless laugh. She remembered the strength of the darkness over the bond, she knew it would take time to fade. But he had fought it. He had won.

Darkness or not, they were getting on that escape shuttle. She offered him her open hand. “Come on, Ben, let’s go.”

He smiled softly in return. “We did it.”

When he didn’t move to take her hand, she knelt in front of him, waiting for him. She studied his face, the tears cutting down his pale cheeks, his eyes illuminated in a flashing red hue from the alarms. The toxin had set fire to her own blood, slowly weakening her, but she couldn’t see any signs of the black latticework of the toxin on his face yet; they still had time. When he had been injected the first time, he had been near death, and he was still able to fight his way through the Finalizer under its influence. His body was far stronger to fight now. He had plenty of time to make it off the destroyer and get to a medbay.

Everything will be okay, she told herself reassuringly. Was he still under the pervasive influence of the darkness? Is that why he wouldn’t stand? Was that why he looked at her like that? She wanted them to go back to how they had been moments ago, when he kissed her as he held her in his arms.

“Everything will be okay, Ben.”

“Yes, because you’re here,” he murmured.” I thought I lost you. I did. I watched you die, Rey, but you’re okay. The Force finally answered my pleas.” His lips quivered with emotion, drawing her eyes to them. She considered whether they had time to kiss again. She knew if she did, it was quite possible she would never stop. His hand reached up to gently stroke her cheek, his fingers trembling. “Force, I love you, Rey.” It was everything she wanted to hear, but the way he said it was ice in her veins. He said it with that tone again, like he was saying goodbye.
Everything will be okay. She searched his eyes for confirmation of the truth, that everything would be okay.

Everything didn’t feel okay. Something felt off. The tone of his voice felt off. The pain in his eyes felt off. The tears on his cheeks and the trembling of his fingers felt off. As she attempted to temper her panic, to remind herself that everything will be okay, she pressed against his mind for reassurance. The barrier slipped—only slightly—as it had done when she had seen his vision of her parents.

He was thinking of her. It must have been the moment right before they kissed and Sidious fell. He gripped her hand as he pulled her to him. The force of them coming together stole his breath. There was an intense crackling of energy between them as he stared into her eyes. It was odd seeing herself from his perspective; her parted lips, her freckles, her eyes illuminated by the light…

Rey blinked.

The light on her face in his memory was all wrong. The red flashing from above made sense, but the quick flash of blue troubled her, though she couldn’t quite discern why. Ben stared at her with an odd expression. He was waiting for something. No, he was waiting for her to understand something. The light…

Blue, why was it blue?

No, it wasn’t as much blue as it was…

Indigo.

The new awareness broke through the delusions of her mind like light through the fog. “I should have left sooner,” he rasped. His voice sounded far away, or underwater, through the ringing in her ears as the truth shattered through her. “I always thought it was too late. I didn’t realize that it wasn’t too late…until actually was. I’m sorry.” Rey remembered that moment from the vision; she knew what it meant. He hadn’t been grasping her hand when he pulled her into him, he had been grasping the very object she still held in her palm.

The lightsaber.
She dropped it to the floor as if it had burned her, her eyes trailing down his shirt to where his hand lay resting on his abdomen. Only, his hand wasn’t just resting there.

It was *pressing*.

Her fingers trembled as she dragged his hand away from his body.

The sound that tore from her throat was not quite words or a sob or a cry. There wasn’t a word in Basic for that sound, nor a word for the physical pain she felt that stole every last bit of warmth from her body. Her entire world had changed between blinks, and she wanted to take her lightsaber and cut away those seconds, erase them, and live forever in that moment when she had believed everything would be okay. She squeezed her eyes shut and reopened them, desperate to wake up from this nightmare.

The dark, circular scorch mark in the crimson fabric left her with no doubt. Her entire body felt paralyzed as she stared at the wound, as if staring at it long enough would make it disappear. She was vaguely aware that she was repeating the word "no" over and over, grasping onto it like a lifeline. The First Order had fallen, Sidious was defeated, her friends were saved, everything was *supposed* to be okay. It wasn’t, however. It was the farthest from okay. How could this have happened? When? *Who*?

The lightsaber had been in her hand.

As her mind replayed every last moment of the fight, even the hazy, dark ones, she couldn’t remember the moment she had done it. She remembered those last seconds of desperation when she had struggled to stay on her feet in her weakening state. Her last thought before he pulled her into him was the warning in the Force, when *she* had reached to stop him…by grabbing the lightsaber.

*No.*

“What have I done?” she whispered as she reached for the wound—to help him, to examine the damage, or to prove it was real, she wasn’t certain. With quivering fingers, he swiftly caught her hand. He touched her with such devotion, such *love*, as if *she* hadn’t been the one to do this to him. Staring at his fingers, a flash of memory—either hers or his—replayed in her mind. Her eyes trailed up to his, and they confirmed everything she needed to know.
He had been holding the lightsaber, struggling against the darkness. His finger had been on the trigger, he had pulled her toward him. How had she not known? She shook her head as the tears began to cut down her cheeks. Only one chamber had been ignited, she had been spared... because she hadn’t pressed the trigger.

He had.

“Why?!” she screamed at him, though it came out as little more than a plea.

No. This is a dream. It has to be a dream. This can’t be real, I’ll wake up and everything will be okay. It….

It wasn’t a dream. She knew it wasn’t. She could remember every aching second. Barkhesh, Ilum, the Finalizer—it had all happened, it had all led to this moment. There was no denying that this was real, even if she could convince herself otherwise. The Force did not lie. It didn’t matter what she said, or he said; there was only one heartbreaking truth in the Force—this was real. She had feared it, dreamt it, envisioned it, done everything in her power to stop it, but now it was real. It was as if it was an inevitability—destiny.

“Sidious showed us that vision, and I thought I could stop it, I thought I change it, but I did nothing!”

“Shh...,” Ben soothed, his shivering fingers wiping away the despair from her face. He closed his eyes, resting his head back on the debris. His shoulders shuddered a wave of emotion crashed over him. As he sobbed, a content smile spread across his cheeks. “We did it. It’s over. It’s over.” He said it with such...relief, as if he had already accepted the way it would end, as if he wanted it, as if his soul wasn’t splitting in two at the end of the sharp blade of reality. Hers was. He might have accepted this, but she couldn’t. She wouldn’t.

Maybe it’s not that deep. The light had only flashed on her face for a split-second, maybe it would be okay.... Rey held her breath as she slid her hand around his waist, his body quivering under her touch. Her palm slid around to his back, the soft fabric drenched in sweat and blood from earlier wounds. She encountered a few previous tears in the material, and she thought maybe, just maybe it was a shallow wound. Then her fingers touched burnt fabric, still warm from the plasma that had melted it away. Her fingers touched the gaping wound underneath, and he flinched in pain.

No....
“Why?” she repeated, her voice broken in despair. She searched the bond for emotions or thoughts, but his side was still tightly closed off to her. “Do you want to die?” He blinked rapidly, the contentment on his face twisting into anguish as he shook his head. “Then why did you do it, Ben? I don’t understand.”

“You saw the vision, Rey. I would have killed you, or you would have been forced to kill me. I was losing myself to the darkness, and I was terrified you wouldn’t do it. This was all my fault. It had to be me. I couldn’t kill you, and I couldn’t make you do that.”

“We could have found another way!” He wanted her to stop, she could see it in the way his eyes pled with hers. She knew it was useless to argue—the damage had been done—but it was the only thought she could hold onto that would keep her mind from wandering to the inevitability that swiftly approached. “You could have destroyed my lightsaber, you could have—”

He shook his head vehemently. “There was no time. That was our one chance to defeat Sidious, because I finally understood that his greatest weakness was his hatred of my bloodline. He saw that vision, he had to believe it, to feel it. With his attention on my death, I knew it would give Finn and Rose our only chance to protect the galaxy from his evil. It gave us a chance to freeze him forever in Carbonite; he can’t do what he did to anyone else. It had to be this way.”

“What about us?” Her voice broke as she bit back a sob.

“It was me or the galaxy, Rey; I made the choice that you would have made, too. This was the only way to ensure victory. I couldn’t risk it ending any other way.” The look in his eyes as he stared up at her, like she was his whole universe, buried a blade deep inside her own abdomen. It made the room spin and bile rise in her throat. “It’s like Dejarik, Rey. Sidious didn’t see the sacrifice for what it was. He was so focused on killing me that he left himself unprotected. He forgot the other players on the table.”

“No, this isn’t like Dejarik, Ben!” she cried angrily. “This isn’t sacrificing a monster to win a stupid game against your droid! This is real! This is your life!”

“I know,” he said weakly. “It wasn’t until I left you on the Falcon that I realized how much I wanted to live. I wanted more than anything to leave this place with you, I’m sorry. But I saw the endgame the second that poison touched my bloodstream, when you nearly killed him in his anticipation of my death. I tried to make it different, to just pretend, but it wasn’t enough. The Force showed me the path; this was how it was always going to end.” She hiccupped a sob, shaking her head in denial.
It didn’t have to be this way.

If she hadn’t opened herself to Sidious, he wouldn’t have been able to control her in her darkness. If she hadn’t injected herself, she wouldn’t have been as weak against the darkness. If she had fought away the darkness sooner, the darkness wouldn’t have transferred to him. If she hadn’t been there, he wouldn’t have done it. If she had grabbed the lightsaber faster….

“Forgive me, Rey. Please.”

Another explosion rocked the ship, and the floor tilted in the aftermath. Rey knew the hit was fatal. This destroyer would become a graveyard on Ilum as the Empire’s destroyers had become on Jakku. She looked behind her, in the direction she knew emergency shuttles must be located. She had lost the code cylinders, but if she could find Blue, he could help her override the system. They would not go down with this ship.

Go.

When she turned back toward him, there was a finality in his eyes.

No. We’re not done yet.

She wouldn’t lose him. She couldn’t. She would not allow him to die for her, because of her. She would get him to that medbay, and she would save him. That was a promise.

His trembling fingers reached to touch her face, but she grabbed his hand instead. "Stand up, we have to hurry.”

"You need to get off this ship,” he rasped, wincing, as he reached up with his other hand to wipe the tears.

Rey shoved his hands away in anger. She didn’t want him to comfort her, she wanted him to go with her. But as Ben’s gaze dropped to the floor, she felt immediate remorse for pushing him away. Standing before him, she offered him her hand again. He still made no move to take it or to stand, and, for the first time, she wondered if he could. Her anger faded as the fear ripped its talons into her hope. “Damn it, Ben! Get up!” she pleaded. “We need to get off this ship!”
Ben shook his head, and she knelt next to him. She cupped his face in her hands, prepared to reason with him, but he spoke first. “I’ve done terrible things, Rey, terrible things. Maybe it’s,” he blinked away the tears pooling in his soft, brown eyes, “maybe it’s better this way. Leave me here, let me fall with my ship.”

“No! Don’t say things like that! If you…” she couldn’t say it, she couldn’t say die. “Then how will you make amends for what you’ve done? You still have a galaxy to help put back together. Your father died to save you; don’t let that be in vain!”

Ben didn’t answer, but his eyes did. He wouldn’t go with her willingly. That ignited Rey’s own resolution. She released his face and moved behind him. She wouldn’t give up on him; she would force him to stand. He groaned as she tried to lift him up, then pain exploded like a supernova in her abdomen. She released him in shock, and he collapsed back onto the floor. Her free hand clasped over her mouth. His barriers had slipped, his pain—the pain she had caused him—had slipped through. Rationally, she had known he was dying, but feeling it made it too real.

*No, you can’t take him from me,* she begged the Force. *I love him.*

The soft rumble of his voice drew her attention back to him. “Do you truly love me?”

She hadn’t expected such a simple question to tear her apart as much as it did. Her face twisted with despair. “Yes!”

"If you love me, then you need to leave me here, Rey. You need to find my escape shuttle and take it to the *Falcon*. Rose and Finn are waiting for you; they’ll find you a medbay. You have to go, you have to live—they need you." *And I need you.* His eyes were glossy, and his lips quivered as he begged her to save herself. Didn’t he understand? The only way to save herself was to save him.

*If you die, I die.*

"I'm not leaving this ship without you."
Violence against many characters

Major character fatally wounded
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
The ship shuddered around them as Finn interlocked his fingers with Rose. In his other hand, he held the heavy, vibrating hilt of Ben’s lightsaber, its red hue lighting their path to freedom. He had seen it up close before, of course, but never appreciated it for what it was. It was wild and volatile, difficult to wield, and unstable even in comparison with Rey’s lightsaber—but a magnificent weapon in its own right. Finn respected its power, how easily it had pierced through the clone… Snoke…Sidious…whoever he was. The man was nothing more than a macabre statue as the other stormtroopers pushed the hovering slab to their ship. The weapon in Finn’s hand should have made him feel safe, but he couldn’t escape a growing dread building in the pit of his stomach. The *Millennium Falcon* was within sight, but the exhilaration and relief he expected to feel seemed to dissipate with each step.

Rose had asked him something, but he hadn’t realized he had been so engrossed by his thoughts until she turned to him expectantly. Her smile faltered as she studied his face, but he wouldn’t have hidden his fears from her even if he could.

“Rey will be okay,” she said. “You saw what Ben looked like on that skyway; we have time.”

It should have eased his fears, because she was right. But that uneasy feeling inside him wouldn’t be silenced. “Rose….” he couldn’t put into the words the strange anxiety he felt, so he focused on what he could. “Do you think anyone can feel the Force?”

She shrugged. “Rey says it’s inside everyone and everything, so I suppose to an extent. Why?”

Finn stared at the crackling weapon in his hand. He had watched it cut down a man on Tuanul. It was the weapon that nearly delivered his fate on Starkiller—burning his shoulder and nearly severing his spine. He had watched it slice through the apparition of Luke Skywalker. Rey had stood between it and Finn’s blaster in her temple room. It had illuminated the darkness of a cave on Ilum. Rey had used it to slaughter an army. It sliced through Finn’s binders in a prison cell on the Finalizer. In Finn’s hand, it cut through their greatest adversary. This symbol of the path their lives had taken through the war vibrated unstably in his hands, and he feared this wasn’t the end of its story. What if the unease he felt was forged from this lightsaber? He had felt the strange heaviness in the crystal cavern. What if it knew the role it would play next? Or the role he would?

What if it wasn’t the lightsaber? What if there was something in the Force that he couldn’t quite perceive, something he wouldn’t be capable of preventing, a *destiny* just beyond the horizon that was as consequential as the strange feeling stirring inside him. “Ben told me I would know when to kill Sidious, because of the Force inside me,” he said softly, “and I did.”
Rose studied him closer, her words careful. “Well, then you did.”

Do you think we can feel other people in the Force, like they can?” he asked as his eyes returned to the lightsaber in his hand.

“Sometimes, when Rey was upset, I could almost feel it, like her emotions were affecting mine. I would feel sad when I hadn’t before or something like that.” Rose grasped his free hand in support, grounding him with the soothing tightness of her hand. “Why?”

“I feel… I can’t explain it, but I think something bad is going to happen,” he said, refusing to look at her. “Or maybe something already did.”

Rose stopped, dragging his focus to her by jerking his hand. He turned and stared deep into her reassuring eyes. “Do you want to go back?” she asked. “I’ll go with you.”

If there was one certainty, it was that Rose was sincere. He knew she would go back with him, but he had already risked her life enough. They had defeated Sidious, Hux, and Phasma, and started the avalanche of events that would culminate in the fall of the First Order. They had won. Rey had her lightsaber and the Force; there was nothing in the galaxy that she couldn’t defeat. She had proven time and again that she did not require rescuing, and though it had been a steep learning curve, he trusted in that knowledge. If something went wrong, Ben was there. It was a fairly recent concept, but Finn trusted Ben with Rey’s life, with all of their lives. Without a doubt, Finn knew the former Supreme Leader and Knight of Ren loved her; he would die before he allowed anything to happen to her. There was a distinct comfort he found in that. The uneasiness, he convinced himself, would fade when they were all together again.

“No,” he said with resolution. “Let’s get on the ship and go pick them up. I think it just hasn’t sunken in yet that this is finally over.” They stepped out of the corridor into the main hangar. It looked like he imagined the apocalypse might. Though he had seen hangars on the Supremacy and Finalizer in the chaos of battle, he had never seen how it looked after. The floor was littered with blasters, bodies, and discarded equipment. Stations had been abandoned, there was not a soul in sight, and the silence only served to increase his agitation. He felt like a ghost exploring an unknown underworld. It felt nothing like the destroyer to which he had once been assigned. Most of the hangar had been cleared of fighters, save for the ones cracking with the remnants of a fire, but the Millennium Falcon was safe where they had left it. It was salvation, beckoning them. He should have felt relieved. Finn cast one last glance to the dark corridor behind them.
When he turned back, Rose was watching him. “It’s over,” she said. He nodded, forcing himself to move forward. “Do you know what that means?” He shook his head as she guided him up the boarding ramp. She smiled. “We can get married.”

“You still want to marry me?”

She turned and stared at him like he was her entire galaxy, and for one moment, he forgot his worries. “Yes, my big dummy, I do,” she said.

When Finn had asked Rose, he wanted it more than anything, but part of him feared they would never make it through the end of the war. Though she had always held an unwavering hope that everything would turn out okay in the end, he had never been able to maintain that steadfast belief. Part of him believed it was too good to be true. Was their suffering finally over? Could he live a happy, boring life for the rest of his days? Nothing had ever sounded better. “I do, too. Want to marry you, I mean.”

“Then we will,” she said, beaming. The stormtroopers pushed the Carbonite slab on board the Falcon, and they both watched as the hatch closed behind them. “Do you think Rey and Ben will get married?”

Finn couldn’t help but smile at the thought of Rey—after a life of suffering and loneliness—content and happy with someone who could give her everything she deserved. And they would still be a family, of course. They could visit each other often and talk via holoprojectors and comlinks in between, and he wouldn’t have to worry about her as she traveled the galaxy. It would all be okay. “Why wouldn’t they?”

It was strange to be back inside the Millennium Falcon. As they passed one room, he saw the discarded stormtrooper armor. In another was the debris of medical wrappers and a balled-up black tunic. In one corner was the blanket they had wrapped around an unconscious Rey. There were discarded lightsaber pieces on a workbench. A drawer containing Rey’s Jedi texts stood open. They passed by the room that held the body of the Wookiee. In the cockpit, they found the pre-launch procedure finished. In a way, it represented the timeline of their journey from Ilum to the Finalizer. It was an incredible journey that had changed them all, and now all that remained as proof that they had experienced it were the remnants left behind.

Rose lowered herself into the co-pilot’s seat. “Do you think they’ll bother with marriage, I mean?” she asked, refocusing his attention on their previous conversation. “Because they already have that Force bond?”
“I honestly don’t know,” Finn answered as he lowered himself before the controls. “I can’t imagine them having kids. They’re both a little…intense.”

Rose snorted. “It wouldn’t be easy with their lifestyle.”

“What, the Force thing?” He wasn’t focused on her as he fired up the sublight engines, otherwise he would have understood that her silence was not due to her preoccupation with the controls.

“No, because Ben is still a war criminal,” she said after a moment, her tone more serious than before. “They’ll have to constantly be on the run. Unless you plan on turning him over to the allies and let him face, at best, a lifetime in prison.” He hadn’t thought about that. Finn had been so concerned with winning the war that he hadn’t thought about the consequences after. Without Ben—he thought back to Ilum, the detainment cell, the bridge, the skyway, Force Destiny, the Carbonite—without Ben they would have lost the war. That had to count for something.

“No, that’s not good enough,” he said, running from the cockpit and down the corridor in search of his comlink.

“Finn?”

“Start the launch procedure without me,” he shouted over his shoulder, “I have to talk to Poe.” As he ran down the hallway, he crashed into something solid and stumbled back. From where he had landed on the floor, Finn looked up to find a stranger in a flightsuit.
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Rey pulled Ben to his feet. She tried to hold him up with the Force, but she couldn't find a method that didn't cause him more pain. She let him go, and he crumpled to the ground again.

"Please, Ben, get up," she begged. His eyes were sorrowful and full of pain, but she wouldn't give up on him. Pulling him to his feet again, she tried to support him until he stumbled. He collapsed to his knees, his hair falling over his eyes as he bowed his head in exhaustion.

"Leave me."

"No." She tried to lift him again, but he stopped her.

"Rey..." he grabbed her hand to force her to look him in the eyes. "I can't. And you'll only grow weaker by the minute with that poison inside you. Please... leave me."

She shook her head as she sobbed. "I can't leave you," she cried. "I made a promise and I intend to keep it." His agony drilled into her bones even though she still sensed his mental shields in their bond. She suspected that this pain she sensed from him was only the blunt edge of the torture he was suffering.

The exhaustion dimmed the brightness in his pleading eyes. "This isn't about promises. I'm dying. You need to leave me, so that you have a chance to get to a medbay."

"Would you leave me?" she demanded through tears. Ben didn't answer, but he didn't have to. She could see the answer in his eyes. "Then don't ask me to leave you."

He was right about one thing, they had to leave. The ship was falling apart, Ben was deteriorating quickly, and she needed to find his droid. "I'll be right back. Please hold on." Rey stood and surveyed the debris around them, attempting to find a suitable path to the floor above them. The memories of the last time she had climbed debris tormented her thoughts. They had climbed out of the ruins of his grandfather’s castle together. He had refused to go with her then too, but they had worked together to escape. They would do it again. She would help him, she would save him, as she had after Concordia.

With a running start, she leapt onto the debris and jumped for the floor above. Her fingers nearly slipped off the edge, but with a little help from the Force, she pulled herself up. The smoke was thick as she began her search, her path only illuminated by the flashing red alarms. In the darkness, she nearly stumbled into a hole in the center of the corridor. "Blue?" she called across the chasm. As she had in the wreckage of Star Destroyers a thousand times before, Rey leapt across the chasm. "Blue?" she called into each room, squinting her eyes in the darkness. The droid didn’t answer her. He probably hates me. "Blue, please, I’m sorry!"

Three doors up on the left, Ben’s voice rasped in her mind. It was relieving to know that somewhere on the floor below he was conscious and following her in the Force.

She ran through the third blast door to find a room full of weaponized droids. Last time he ran away, he hid with other droids.

The walls were lined with shelves of droids of all different models. Rey searched the corner where
several dark astromechs with head-mounted cannons were discarded. She knew she was in the right place when she heard the soft whimper. “Blue?” Metal clinked on metal as the droid pushed himself further behind the others. “Blue, I’m sorry. I’m not… I didn’t… I’m sorry.” Rey lowered herself down on her hands and knees on the surprisingly warm floor. “I never wanted to hurt you, or Ben, but the… bad thing… inside me is gone now. I won’t hurt you, I promise.” The droid remained hidden from her. She could hear the uneven hum of his internal drives, he was critically damaged as well. *I promise I’ll fix you, too.* “Blue, Ben needs you. Please.”

The droid slowly, cautiously, emerged from the shadows. She offered a hand to guide him, but he stayed out of her reach. With opened palms in supplication, she spoke softly to the frightened astromech. “Ben is hurt. This ship is broken, and we have to take an emergency shuttle to get him to a medbay, or… do you understand what it means to die?”

The word clearly meant something to Blue, because he was pushing past her before she could finish the sentence.

By the time she found her way out of the room, Blue was using his tethers to cross the chasm. She sprinted after him, not bothering to slow down or plan her steps before launching herself through the smoke after him. When she landed on the other side, he had disappeared from sight, but she knew he hadn’t run again. He wouldn’t leave Ben to die. Finding her way to the remnants of the Carbonite room, she found that he had already repelled down to his ‘master,’ who had moved precariously close to the edge of the pit in the floor.

His string of beeps and whistles were hurried as he rattled off the directions to Ben’s personal emergency shuttle. There was no sign of the frightened droid as he explained his concerns over the amount of time they had, reminding her he could get through the security measures for the escape shuttle, but only as long as some power remained operational.

Though his internal drives had begun to grind and spark, the droid was focused and… brave. He bounced over rubble and into the corridor without the slightest hesitation and Rey had faith that if it could be done, he would do it. Blue would get them off this destroyer. In return, she would make certain his master survived long enough to make it to the shuttle and get help, he would live to know how brave his droid had been in the face of death. And Blue would survive to tell the story. That was a promise.

When Rey returned to her bondmate, his eyes were closed, but she could still feel his heartbeat in the Force. That was enough. She wrapped her arms underneath his and around his chest. She cried out as she tried to drag his considerable weight. Absorbing energy from the Force around her, she provided herself just enough strength to pull Ben over the debris, and into the corridor.

Another explosion rocked the ship. Alarms were blaring as fire burned holes in the floor from the levels below them. The corridors were empty; the ship held thousands and yet there was not a single soul in sight. Rey pulled her shirt over her mouth, coughing from the toxic air. She slowed her breathing as best she could with the Force, understanding the grim reality that they would both die if she lost consciousness.

Her lungs were raw from the heat, each breath shot white-hot pain through her chest. Still she pressed on, she was a survivor, and so was Ben. Everything would be alright, just as it had been before. He had faced death on Starkiller, Concordia, and Ilum. And those were just the instances she had been present for. He could survive this too. He was quiet, but she grasped tightly to their bond. As long as he was in pain, he was alive.

"Talk to me, Ben," she begged. "Why did you finally do it? Why did you leave? If you would have stayed, you would be safe. You knew you were going to die, why did give up on something you
sacrificed everything for? It was the most important thing to you. Why did you give up power over the entire galaxy?" She wanted to make him angry, as angry as she was. Anger would give him strength.

Her plan backfired, however, when her strength fell away with his pained words. "Because," he coughed weakly, "it was nothing compared to what I gave up in return. You are my entire galaxy, Rey. You are the only person in my entire life worth fighting for and worth dying for."

Rey choked back a sob and searched the darkness for more strength to drag him. "Don't talk like that, if I'm worth dying for, then I should be worth living for."

Ben coughed again, the nauseating rattle of the fluid in his lungs consumed her thoughts. Would they make it? Did they have enough time? Could a medbay help him? Everything will be okay. Grasping to the bond in comfort, she searched deep for more strength to quicken her pace.

“I should have left sooner,” he rasped. “I convinced myself it was to protect you, but I was too afraid to leave.”

Rey bit her lip to hold it together. He needed her. “Don’t be sorry, Ben. You did it, you’re free, and now we can be together.” His body grew heavier, but she could still hear his labored breathing; there was still time.

Black smoke billowed from the life-support vents, suffocating the corridor. Crimson streaks stretched like grasping claws of death on the floor behind them. The lights flickered, then cast the struggling pair into darkness. At once, Rey was nauseous and lightheaded, the corridor was heaving around her as the inertial dampener failed. It was a disheartening sign; if the ship was losing systems, the power would not likely return. If it didn’t return, Blue couldn’t slice his way into the emergency craft.

Without warning, the ship pitched to the side and her feet lost contact with the floor. The artificial gravity generator had been compromised. “Ben!” She grasped for him in the weightless darkness, but couldn’t reach him. She was tumbling in an uncontrolled mess of limbs, reaching for a wall to direct her trajectory toward her bondmate. Not that she could see anything in the pitch darkness, but she could hear his rasping breath.

There was no light, no sense of direction, and the only other sound in the eerie silence – besides the ringing in her ears, a lingering effect from the sirens – was the sound of durasteel creaking as the destroyer barreled through space toward certain death. They floated helplessly for a moment before the lights flickered back on – and in the split second they remained in limbo in the air – Rey saw spherical bubbles of red hovering above Ben’s unconscious body. With the lights returned the artificial gravity, however, and they dropped violently to the floor.

Ben hit the black tile with a sickening thud, not even a moan escaping his lips. She stood, a throbbing ache in her head numbed her senses. Her balance took the worst hit, without the Force she wouldn’t have been capable of walking, let alone standing. A pulsating hum deafened the sound around her, her shoes were melting to the floor from the heat from the fire below. Just as she had lifted his heavy weight up enough to wrap her arms around him again, bile rose to her throat as the ship slowed rapidly.

It had likely been negligible in their overall speed, but it was enough to pitch them forward down the corridor. The angle became too steep and they began to slide, accelerating quickly over the sleek tile. She feared they had already entered Ilum’s atmosphere and were making their final descent straight into the ground. There wasn’t much to do but hold onto Ben as best she could and await whatever fate was destined for them. The steep incline leveled out on its own, however, and
she immediately wrapped her arms around him again and dragged him frantically to the escape pods. She could feel the weakening effects of the poison in her veins, but she pushed herself harder. They were in a race against time as the internal systems failed.

"Stay with me, Ben."

Chapter End Notes

Emotional duress as characters manage the fatal injury of a major character
Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
The Hutt ships had been destroyed. The TIE fighters had long since stopped engaging them. Around the time he last spoke with Finn, there had been a mass exodus of TIEs that fled directly to Ilum. Without a single hostile shot fired, the swarm of fighters immediately surrendered to the Alliance. Some even joined the firefight to bring the Finalizer down. They had systematically disabled the destroyer until it had become inoperable heap of durasteel floating through space. The other coordinated attacked on the flotillas around the galaxy had been equally successful.

It seemed impossible hours ago, but they had done it.

The First Order had fallen.

Or, at least, it would fall soon. The only problem was Poe refused to make the final, debilitating, assault. The other pilots had followed his orders of non-lethal hits as best they could. There were a few strikes he feared could have proven lethal to the others still aboard the destroyer, and Poe had lost his temper with the unfortunate pilots, but, as far as he could tell, the reactor remained functioning. He knew that Finn and the Millennium Falcon should have left the Finalizer with the mass exodus.

It had been too long.

Something had happened to his friends. At first, he thought they were just ensuring the others escaped first. Then the fighters stopped coming, but there was still no freighter. Then he assumed the Falcon had become disabled in the firefight, or had otherwise malfunctioned—which wasn’t improbable in the realm of possibilities. But he had sent a squadron back for them. The Falcon was empty, though its pre-launch procedures were completed, suggesting they had been interrupted mid-launch sequence. Even after the foreboding news, Poe stalled. Maybe they had chosen to go back for Ben. He had given them all the time he could. But the eyes of the fleet were on him, and he couldn’t delay the inevitable in denial any longer. His friends weren’t coming.

Perhaps it made him a terrible leader, but he couldn’t bring himself to take down the Finalizer until they were found. He had made a promise.

“Admiral?” a voice rasped over his comlink. “It’s Black four on the Falcon.”

This was it. This was when he had to make a choice. With a slow, shuddered exhale he picked up
the comlink. “This is Admiral Dameron.”

“Sir, you asked me to stop anyone from taking the freighter, but you might want to talk to this one.”

Poe sighed. “Go ahead.”

“Poe?” the new, but encouragingly familiar voice said over the comlink.

“Finn?” Poe whooped and laughed into the cockpit, kicking and drumming on the panels in a relieved hysteria. “Buddy! It’s a success! All of it! You should see how many stormtroopers have fled to Ilum to surrender! Where are you?”

“We’re leaving on the Falcon now,” his friend answered.

Poe felt like he could breathe again, but he had to ensure he kept his promise to Ben. “Is Rey with you?”

“Rey’s with Ben.” The way he said it made it sound as if Ben wasn’t with them, and if Rey and Ben weren’t with them, then Poe couldn’t destroy the Finalizer until they were.

“Ben didn’t want you to leave without….”

“They’re getting on an escape pod, but we’re meeting them on the far side of Ilum,” Finn assured him. “We all got separated. There were some complications with the clone, but we got—”

Poe’s eyes were drawn from the hangar bay entrance to the comlink in his hand. “Clone?”

“Yeah, it involves a resurrection machine and a story for later.” The Force Destiny. Ben had told him about the darkside machine and the plans to resurrect Sidious and an army of darkside users when he was on the Falcon. As Poe had waited to destroy the ship, they had been fighting against serious evil. The battle had been far more consequential than he had imagined. They had been delayed because they were in mortal peril—the entire galaxy had been.
Poe could barely bring himself to ask the question that held the fate of the galaxy in the balance: “Is Sidious dead?”

“Technically, no, but he’s frozen in Carbonite. If he’s ever unfrozen, he’ll die, because I stabbed him with Ben’s lightsaber.”

Poe hollered in excitement. “Look at you, Big Deal! Wait ‘til the galaxy hears about this! You’ll be famous!” As his enthusiasm faded, the remainder of Finn’s words settled over him. “Wait, why’d you have Ben’s lightsaber? Is he okay? Everybody’s okay?” Why was that question unsettling in a way that caused a shiver to run down his back?

“Yeah,” his friend said, but it almost sounded as if he was entirely convinced either. “We were separated and he threw it to me, but he’s fine. We’re all…fine.”

“Good. Good. Finn, I…” Poe cleared his throat. There was so much he had to tell Finn, so much to apologize for. But they had time. It was the one thing that hadn’t been promised to them at the beginning of the war, but now, all they had was time. He could tell them all what needed to be said, in time. Poe’s attention was drawn to the hangar as the freighter rocketed out into space. “I’ll meet you on the other side of Ilum, then. I thought I’d come aboard before Ben and Rey get there.”

“I need to talk with you first,” Finn said hesitantly. “About Ben.”

That wasn’t what he was expecting. “About Ben?”

“About what happens now to the Supreme Leader of the First Order.” The connection grew quiet. “What will the Alliance do?”

Judging by Finn’s tone, he knew full well what the Alliance would do to Ben. “Look, there is a group of other generals on my council and they—”

“Will they throw him in prison?”

Poe knew what they would do, which meant he knew what he had to do, even if he risked imprisonment himself. “For what he’s done, they’ll probably execute him, Finn. We’re talking
genocide. I can’t erase that, which is why—”

“But if it weren’t for him—”

“I know. I know,” Poe assured him. “That’s why I want you to pick me up. I have something he needs. Then he can take my fighter and disappear in the Outer Rim. The Alliance will never find him, and I’ll make sure they never look for him.”

“What about Rey?” Finn whispered.

Poe hadn’t planned that far, but from the moment Ben allowed himself to be captured by the First Order to save their friends and the galaxy, Poe knew—despite the atrocities Ben had committed—he couldn’t allow the former Supreme Leader to be captured by the Alliance. It went against everything he knew to be “just” and “right,” but he had never felt less conflicted about a decision. “We’ll give him the comlink,” he assured his friend, “and he can send for her when he settles down somewhere.”

“You’ll let him escape?” As his friend spoke, Poe watched an escape craft blast from the side of the destroyer. The craft’s transponder codes were registered as the Supreme Leader’s private escape shuttle. It has to be them. Focusing on the craft with his thermal scanner, he saw two bright, glowing heat signatures. Force-users. There was no doubt in his mind it was them.

Poe smiled. For the first time since the war had begun, he didn’t feel the weight of the galaxy on his shoulders.

“I don’t think we’d have won this without his help,” Poe told his friend. It may have been the first time he admitted it aloud, but it wasn’t the first time he had thought it. “And I personally wouldn’t care if the guy dropped dead, but I owe it to Rey and Leia, and probably the rest of the galaxy to do this.”

“Good.” Finn sighed in relief. “Then I’ll see you on the other side of Ilum.”

Poe turned his attention to the comms for the fleet. “It’s time to burn the First Order down! I’m going in for a fatal hit!” He set his sights for his target and engaged his thrusters.

There were cheers and shouts over the comms as the others distanced themselves from the broken
vessel. Soaring across the burning mass of durasteel, Poe rolled his fighter to the belly of the destroyer. His target was the massive compartment for the hypermatter annihilator reactor. There was a glow from inside as the outer wall had already been breached. “Let’s do this, buddy,” he said to Beebee-ate. “Full thrusters.” He pushed the throttle forward as far as it could go. As he passed the reactor compartment, Poe fired two missiles into the opening and banked to the right to put as much distance between him and the reactor as swiftly as possible.

In a bright flash, the Finalizer burst into a fireball behind Poe as he made his way around the white world to the Millennium Falcon.
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Blue was waiting outside the escape shuttle as promised, tethered to the wall in the event the ship experienced another steep descent. The doors of the small craft were open, and Rey did her best to smile for Blue’s sake as she dragged Ben off the Finalizer. The droid trilled an innocent string of questions. With her back to him, Rey bit her hand to suppress a sob. Should she worry him needlessly? Should she lie to him? “Not exactly like after Concordia, Blue.”

Rey remembered how terrified she had been back then as Ben’s life slipped through her fingers. He had come so far since then; they both had. She could only have hope they could do it again. “We need to find a medpac,” she whispered, “and get to the Falcon and find a medbay. Can you launch the shuttle?” The droid chirped in the affirmative and left toward the cockpit, but hesitated next to Ben.

She knelt next to him. "Ben, talk to me.” He didn't answer. She reached into the Force and held onto the bond. She could sense his weakening lifeforce, and the thought of not making it to a medbay in time terrified her.

Before she could stop him, Blue shocked Ben as he had done after Concordia. Rey smiled down at Ben reassuringly when his eyes finally fluttered open. "Sorry about that, but you have to stay awake.” She tried to keep Ben focused while she searched the emergency craft for a medpac.

The pod was large for its purpose. It was comprised of a cockpit and a passenger compartment. It contained space for two pilots in the cockpit and a blastdoor that could close the cockpit off from the remainder of the craft. The passenger compartment was an arrangement of two bench seats, each side long enough to fit five people comfortably. Each bench was situated under transparisteel viewports that ran the length of the craft.

Ben was on the floor in between the two benches, and the sight was painful in its familiarity. It was where Rey had lain, in an identical craft, after she had fled the throne room. She had imagined then what it would have looked like if she had dragged his unconscious body with her, stowing him in the compartment until he reawoke, likely in a fit of fury. She had never thought she would be back there with him as he lay unconscious at her feet. She wished it was only unconsciousness that afflicted him now.

Rey knew she couldn’t stand around regretting the way it had all transpired; she needed to find that medpac. There was an empty storage compartment for weapons or luggage at the stern of the craft,
as well as storage underneath the bench seats, but it was all empty. A quick scan of the cockpit confirmed her fears. She stared at the propaganda holoposters projected over the viewports with a hand clasped over her mouth as she tried to hold it together.

*How can an emergency pod have no medpacs?*

Blue must have recognized Rey’s struggle and moved toward the cockpit to launch the shuttle, but Ben lifted a hand to stop him. He patted the droid gently, his eyes glistening. Blue pivoted toward him and held out a tool arm with an ignited blue flame, small but bright in the dim lights of the escape craft. Rey felt the pull of energy from the Force in the small space, and an orange flame sparked in her bondmate’s hand. Ben reached out a finger to the droid to blend the flames together, only for a second, before the flame extinguished. His arm fell heavily to his side in exhaustion. The droid stared meaningfully at the single flame for a moment before returning the tool arm away with a small whimper of understanding. Ben smiled something wistful and full of pride. “The best part about you is that you’re not like the others. Don’t ever forget that, okay?”

Rey couldn’t bite back the sob this time.

*Don’t, Ben. Don’t you dare say goodbye.*

For as innocent and naïve as the droid had been, he seemed to understand. Or, in the very least, he thought he’d trade one truth for another. He whirred a string of low beeps in return. She could hear Blue’s rueful words in her head as if he’d given voice to them himself. *And you are not bad, Master.* They stared at each other for a moment, a lifetime of meaning in one glance, before Ben nodded once, and Blue hung his domed head as he rolled into the cockpit to start the launch procedure. When he was out of earshot, Ben turned to her.

“Take care of him for me.”

"Don’t talk like that. Please. I would never forgive myself if you…” Tears blurred Rey’s vision, and her fingers quivered uncontrollably, making shutting the blastdoors difficult. “This is all my fault. If I would have just—”

“Rey, no, I did this; blame me. Hate me, but don't…don’t do this to yourself.”

She couldn’t hate him, even at his worst—she had tried. She wouldn’t hate him for this. She didn’t *need* to hate him; he was fine. He would be fine. She couldn’t even keep him awake after
Concordia, but she had saved him then, and she would do it again.

*Everything will be okay.*

It had to be. The Force wouldn’t be this cruel to take her parents and the man she loved. Nothing could keep them apart. *Nothing.* Finn would rescue them out there, and Ben would be okay. They would go to the medbay and fix him, and then lie on a bunk for twelve hours just so she could listen to his heartbeat. They would never be alone again. He would join the Resistance, become friends with Finn and Rose, and even Poe would see what she had seen in him all along. They would travel the galaxy together. And if they weren’t together, they could find each other through the bond, just as they always had.

It was the same voice, convincing her of truths, that she had heard many times before as she lay awake at night on Jakku. She focused on the task before her, convincing herself that it would all be okay, the way she had convinced herself her family would return. When she turned back to him, a pained look had crossed his face, almost as if he could sense her return to denial. “Rey?” His words trembled with the weight of his thoughts.

She was all at once fearful of what he was going to say. “Ben...”

“I’m dying.” The finality of his tone drew a sob from somewhere in her soul. She shook her head defiantly, but he continued. “I need you to promise me you’re not going do this to yourself again. I don’t want to leave you like this. Tell me you’ll be okay, that you won’t let the darkness win. Please.”

“Of course I’ll be okay, because you’re not going to die.” Her voice vacillated between determination and fear. “We’re on our way to the *Falcon*, and we’ll get help. All that matters is that you hold on until we get there.”

"No, all that matters is we stopped Sidious, you’re safe, and you will go on to live the life you deserve. That’s all I wanted.” Ben tried to smile, but his eyes were filled with pain. That unleashed the building terror she had hidden under her determination to get him off that ship. Now that she was running out of distractions, she was forced to face reality, and she knew he could sense it. “There's no point in denying this, Rey. But it's okay. I don't feel the pain inside anymore. I feel...peace. You helped me find that. Everything *will* be okay, because everything happened the way it was destined to. I was never meant to make it out of this alive.”

Blue launched the escape shuttle, and they blasted out into space. The coordinates had been set to hover out of atmosphere on the other side of Ilum where the *Millennium Falcon* would be waiting.
The craft didn’t travel nearly as quickly as she had hoped, but they were safe and directed toward help.

*Everything will be okay.*

Rey abandoned her fruitless search to tend to her bondmate’s injuries. She didn’t have a medpac, but she knew it would have done little but make him comfortable anyway. He needed help she couldn’t give, but she would do everything she could.

Truly taking him in as she knelt by his side, she immediately wanted the distraction of her search when she could pretend that his condition was not dire. His pallor was sickeningly pale, even his lips were absent of color, lifeless. His pupils were dilated, his eyes glassy and struggling to focus. His eyelids were heavy, his blinking languid. Each breath was quick and shallow, but she felt his heartbeat in the Force. It was fast, not showing any signs of slowing. That had to count for something. She believed she would save him; that had to be enough.

Her hand covered his, resting on his abdomen. His skin was cold and clammy to the touch, and when she interlaced her fingers with his, they felt...wet. He fought her momentarily as she tried to overpower him, but he was weak. With little effort, she pulled his hand away and revealed what he had been concealing. There was a dark, growing puddle drenching his shirt; the palm of his hand was stained in crimson. She felt the warmth drain from her face and fought dizziness. He was losing blood, and at an alarming rate. “Ben, please don’t give up. I need you!”

“You don’t need me, Rey, you never have,” he said. There was only acceptance in his eyes. “You’re the strongest person I know; you don’t need anybody.”

“Then I want you! What we have is special and important; we are supposed to be together,” she cried, pressing through his shirt to access his wound. He grimaced at her touch, his raised barriers in the bond all but blocking her out. Her fingers trembled as she attempted to stem the blood escaping through his wound. The cauterization from the blade would have given them more time to find a medbay, but it had ruptured—either in the fall or when she dragged him or during the systems failures in the corridor. His situation was far more critical than she imagined.

Rey closed her eyes and begged the Force to make the nightmare end. She imagined she would wake up in his arms back on Barkhesh. She would startle awake, gasping and terrified, and he would be there for her, holding her the way only he could. He would tell her from across the galaxy that everything would be okay, and she would believe him.

*He was right. He was right about everything, but I was too stubborn to listen. I promise, if you just*
let him make it, I'll believe him. I'll listen. I will be happy with being with him, even if we're on opposite sides of a war. Just please save him.

Rey begged and pleaded, but the Force did not grant her wish. She did not wake up from the nightmare. When she opened her eyes, he was lying at the bottom of the escape craft, his life flowing into her hands in vermillion hopelessness.

“It’s poetic, if you think about it.” His voice was raspy and strained, almost unrecognizable. “I was born in the same city, on the same day the Galactic Concordance was signed to officially end the Empire, and I will die with the flagship the day the First Order was destroyed.”

“Ben, you’re not going to die,” her voice wavered unconvincingly, but somewhere deep in her soul she knew, as he lay gasping for breath, that he was dying in front of her. There was nothing she could do to stop it.

I need help! Luke, Leia, where are you? Please, someone, help me. I can’t do this on my own!

“I can see it in your eyes, Rey. You know the truth.”

No, Ben!

"Listen to me,” she pleaded, “we can get you help. We can be together. You just have to hold on.” He smiled weakly and reached up to caress her face. Her heart broke staring into his soft brown eyes. She knew that look; he wasn’t listening, he was saying goodbye. The Force had been trying for weeks to warn her that this was how it would end. She had tried everything in her power to save him, but it had ended exactly as she’d feared.

This isn't fair. I shouldn't have to say goodbye. I'm not ready to say goodbye. This isn't how it was supposed to be. We were supposed to be together.

Rey hiccupped a sob as she turned her face into the fading warmth of his palm. "Please stay with me.”

His hands shook as he gently wiped tears from her face. He chewed his lip before exhaling slowly, his voice caressing her as softly as his fingers. "I can't stay...you know that."
"But I can save you!"

"You already have." He smiled, then grimaced as his body tensed in pain. She removed the black vest carefully and began unbuttoning the blood-stained shirt, but he rested his free hand over hers. She persisted, searching for access to the wound, hoping to do anything she could to stop the bleeding. As she exposed more skin, she saw the telltale signs of the poison branching like black death across his chest. Hers was likely similar. He still had access to the Force, so he was still fighting against its effects.

They still had time.

Ben grabbed her hand and held it tightly. “Close your eyes.” That voice of denial begged her not to listed, but she acquiesced to his request. His connection to the Force wavered, but he guided her to find his energy. “You see my heart, Rey? The reason it’s beating so fast—the reason I can’t breathe—is I’m losing blood, and my heart is struggling to pump what is left. Don't you see? It’s already too late. There is only one way this ends.” She closed her eyes and shook her head to force away the realization of the true extent of his injury, but the truth found her anyway.

The shields he had built up against her in the bond slipped, and, for a split instant, she felt the crippling torment he was subjected to by his connection to consciousness. Blood burned like molten liquid metal through his lungs as he breathed. Yet he shivered, a piercing cold radiating through his bones as it consumed him. She sensed his lifeforce dwindling. She had no doubt he could close his eyes and find a meditative peace to carry him into eternity, but he chose to further suffer through an indescribable nightmare...

For her.

*There has to be a way to save him.*

"I love you," he breathed, his hand gently caressing her skin. Every second with him was bliss...and pure torture.

"That’s why you can’t leave me alone!"

She knew she shouldn’t scream at him, not like this, not when he was fading away in her arms. She was angry, but not at him. His hand stopped moving on her cheek, and she turned her face to gently
kiss his palm. “You’re not alone,” he murmured. “You’ll never be alone again, you hear me?”

“Then promise me right now you'll stay with me.” He shook his head as a tear fell from his eye, translucent transformed to crimson on its path down his face. Ben slowly closed his eyes, and his hand fell.

“I love you,” she cried desperately, saying anything to keep him with her. His eyes opened drowsily, and they looked…peaceful. It hurt that only on the verge of death did he find it. If there was ever a time she yearned for the spark of a fight in his eyes, she wished it was then.

*Can’t you see that you have so much to live for?* Another tear rolled down his cheek as he stared into her pleading eyes. *Let me save you.*

Rey couldn’t give up. She *refused* to give up. "How did you save me in the caves?"

"It was something I learned, a long time ago," he wheezed. She rested her hand on his temple, searching the Force until she found him. What was once a hurricane of emotion now rolled like a calm sea. She began sifting through his memories to find the information she desperately needed. Grasping her hand, he interrupted the connection. He circled his thumb gently over hers.

"Rey, don’t…," he begged. She felt his exhaustion. He was fighting, but not in the way she wanted. He was fighting inevitability for her sake, but he was quickly losing the battle.

"I have to find a way to…"

There was only resolution in his fading eyes. He shook his head adamantly. "I made the decision in the caves to give up my life. I will not let you do the same for me."

"No, Ben, I have to try." Dropping her hand to his wound, she found a connection to the light inside her. She was already so exhausted, both physically and in the Force, but she was determined to save him or die trying. Without his help, it was difficult to discern how to heal him, but she remembered enough from his memories. Concentrating the strength of her light into her hands, she felt the smallest trickle leaving her fingers…and was met with a wall in the Force. She recognized the sensation from the memory when Ben had tried to save Dev at the Jedi temple. When her eyes found his face, Ben managed a sad smile.
All at once, she understood. “Damn it, Ben! Let me save you!”

"Don't make me shut you out, Rey…it’s over...you're still not letting go…. Just let go...let me go...it's too late…Please...." She did not read anger or frustration in his pained expression, but, rather, pure desperation. He was begging her again, as he had in the throne room, but this time he was asking her to accept the unimaginable.

"What would you have me do? Just give up?” Her voice trembled as she argued with her own desperation. “I won’t sit here and watch you die!”

“Then leave me. I wanted to spare you from this. I still can.” His voice was overcome with remorse…and exhaustion. He closed his eyes, focusing on his rattling breaths. The Force changed around her, it was a tugging sensation, similar to when he was about to strike out in the Force. But nothing happened. He pressed his lips together apprehensively. She did not want to hear what he was contemplating.

“Give me your lightsaber, Rey. Go back to the cockpit, and stay there with Blue until your friends come for you. You are strong, trust me; I know you can do this. One day you’ll realize that it was easier this way. I don’t want this to…I don’t want this one moment to be what you remember. All I want you to remember when you think of me is my love for you. Nothing else matters, nothing else ever did. You don’t even have to say goodbye, I know what is in your heart. It’ll be all right; death is not the end for us.” His words pierced into her heart as if he had used the weapon on her instead. He stifled a sob as she shook her head emphatically through tearful whimpers.

Tears streamed down his face as he begged her. “You can’t save me. Fighting for my life is only prolonging my death. Don’t be afraid for me. This way will be quick. It will finally end the pain. Please.”

He sent images to her mind through the bond. She saw through his eyes, lying on the floor of the shuttle, much as he was now. He held the hilt of her lightsaber to the soft skin of his throat and triggered it. Not that it was much consolation to her, but he was right; it would be quick and painless. Then she saw herself sitting at the controls, knees to her chest, hands covering her ears. Her eyes were fixated on the stars around her. A blue light appeared in the reflection of the viewport. She turned to see him, an apparition of the Force, illuminated by blue. His smile was free of torment and suffering.

Rey pulled away from him to break the onslaught of heartbreaking images.
No! No! No! How could you ask me to give up on you? How could you expect me to leave you to die alone?

Her mind replayed the dreams and visions she’d had of his death. She remembered the way his eyes said goodbye, the way his body looked when his soul left his body. She remembered his last breath escaping his lips as she sobbed into him. Everything she had done to prevent the dreams and visions from coming true had led them here. They made sense now; they were warnings she didn’t heed. The first vision in the hut must have been a manipulation of Sidious—or her own hopeful desires, like her old dreams. The real visions had been clear—the Force had been warning her all along. Ben was always going to die, and it was always going to be her fault. Was she meant to sit idly by while he ended his own suffering? Was she not meant to save him? Then why hadn’t the Force taken him already? If he was alive, it meant he could be saved, didn’t it?

As she was lost in her thoughts, he reached for the lightsaber at her hip. “No, Ben! I can’t let you do that. You have to fight. For me. Please. If this had been me instead, you would be doing everything in your power to save me.”

“I wasn’t lying before; I was going to let you die at Force Destiny, Rey.” The words pained him, his eyes were already begging for forgiveness from himself, as much as they were from her. “Sidious wanted me to trade my life for yours, then he would take my body and lead his Dark Army. I destroyed the machine instead. I sat down beside you and waited for death to take us both. I would have let you go, Rey, if Finn and Rose hadn’t found me.”

“Don’t you see? This is why you have to fight. You’ve changed! You can’t die now.” Her stomach rolled every time she said the word. Die. Death. Dying. They were talking about Ben dying. The words didn’t belong together; they were all wrong. She hiccupped to suppress the wave of anguish arising from the thought of losing the battle for his life. “If you don’t live, what was the point? Why would the Force have you fight your way back to the light just to die? What’s the difference between dying as Ben Solo or Kylo Ren, if you still die?”

“Stopping the First Order, stopping Sidious—that was the point. Leaving this place loved by you, that’s the difference between dying as Ben Solo and Kylo Ren.”

Rey felt as if she was back in the caves of Ilum again, grasping tightly to the wall, knowing the avalanche was coming and there was nothing she could do to stop it. “The fact that I’m not dead right now is proof there’s still hope, Ben! I don’t care what you say, if I was the one lying here, it would destroy you if I took that hope from you. Don’t you dare do that to me. You remember how the death of the Borgle bat tortured me. That was a creature...you are...the other half of my soul. The ‘what ifs’ would devastate me more than watching you die ever could. Stay here with me. Fight like I know you can. If it truly is your destiny to leave me, which I believe in my heart it is not, then I will be right here with you as you take your last breath. You will not die alone, that’s a promise.”
You won’t die. You can’t die.

"I don’t understand what I have done to deserve your love.” His eyes glazed in a far-off stare, his thoughts lost to the stars. She placed her hands on either side of his face, forcing him to look into her eyes.

“You deserve so much more than the torment you suffered since the day you were born. That monster is gone now. You have a chance to be happy; just fight.”

“If I had never fallen to darkness, you wouldn’t have risen in the light as my equal. It was all worth it to me, because it led me to you. Remember that.” His voice broke as he tried to remain strong for her. He wanted nothing more than to take away her pain, and she knew it hurt him that he was the one causing it.

"I love you so much, Ben,” she whimpered, leaning her forehead against his. Their tears merged together as they fell down his cheeks. “So much.”

“I’ll never understand why…” he said weakly. "...why someone so good would fall in love with a monster like me." He coughed again, and his lungs wheezed, struggling to get enough air. She sat up as he shivered violently underneath her. His body was shutting down. They were running out of time.

Where is the Millennium Falcon!? We should be there by now!

A quick glance out the viewport, however, showed them still on the wrong side of Ilum. Would the craft get to the Falcon in time? “Why would I fall in love with a man who loves me? Who understands me like no one else? Who is bonded to me? Who makes me feel whole? A man who just helped my friends save the entire galaxy? A man who wouldn’t sell his soul to a monster when the galaxy needed him most, who chose to do the right thing even if it meant letting me go? That doesn’t sound like a monster to me. You love me. I love you. We’re supposed to be together. You can come home, if you just hold on!” She pleaded for him to see how greatly he deserved to live. Couldn’t he see what his death would do to her?

He released a shuddering breath as he shook his head. “I wish I could. I wish I could spend the rest of your life with you. But spending the rest of my life with you, no matter how short, is more than I had ever hoped for. It’s enough.” Staring into his eyes, she knew he meant it. “But Rey, I need you to understand this. You saved me, you did…but I’m not coming home. I never could have.”
Her sobs echoed through the shuttle as his words echoed in her mind.

*I’m not coming home. I’m not coming home.*

The darkness flooded through her as she drowned in sorrow. His words repeated over and over in her mind. Part of her knew it was unrealistic to believe he could return to the Resistance, become friends with her friends, live free without punishment. But that wasn’t a reason to *let go.* If he wanted to run, she would run. They could still find a way to be happy if he would just let her save him.

Ben had saved himself from darkness, he had saved her, but she hadn’t saved him in return. Even when he had been dying on the *Finalizer,* it was Sidious who had saved him. The monster had brought Ben back to her; he had given him *life.* A thought found her in the darkness.

*Sidious.*

Without Ben’s help, *she* couldn’t save him, but *Sidious* could.

*He’s frozen in Carbonite on the Falcon, if I can find a way unfreeze him, I can make him save Ben.*

She could see the fear in Ben’s eyes as he sensed the depth of her dark thoughts. “Rey, don’t do this.”

“You’re asking me to give up hope! I won’t do it!” she cried.

“Rey…”

She could feel the darkness hovering in her periphery. Waiting. “You have to fight, Ben!”

“Rey…”
“You have to take me to the places you showed me in the stars!”

“Rey!”

She could feel the carefully selected pieces of denial crumbling, falling like sand through her fingers. “What!”

“Don’t go this way,” he said with a softness that contrasted the intensity of the fear in his eyes. “Don’t do what I did. I feel the darkness.”

*If you leave me, Ben, I don’t trust myself.*

She had hidden the truth of the whispers in the Force before; she couldn't do that to him again, even if it was her last chance to save him. “What if I can save you?” Her jaw trembled as she waited for disappointment to flood his eyes. “What if I just wake Sidious and force him to save you. He told me to bring him to Jakku; if that is where they hid the other *Force Destiny*, then—”

Ben shook his head, his expression a mix of fear and anger. “No, Rey.”

“If you die, you leave me alone with him, and I don’t know if I’m strong enough.”

“You saw what he can do. If you make a deal with him to bring me back, I promise you, I will be under his control again. I’ll be alive, but it won’t be the man you saved. I would rather die like this than become someone who wasn’t me anymore...” The wheezing sigh that rattled through his chest as he spoke burned into her mind. It was a sound she had never heard before and prayed she would never hear again. She knew it would torment her nightmares. “I’ll guide you, I’ll help you, I’ll do everything I can to keep that monster away from you. But you need to tell Finn and Rose and Maz and anyone that you can about this darkness, okay? Tell Dameron about the other *Force Destiny* on Jakku; he’ll destroy that place. They'll help you. My mistake was keeping the voices and my darkness a secret. I was terrified of what they would think, what they would say. Don’t you do that, Rey. Do you understand? Even when you're at your weakest, you don't listen to the darkness, okay? You need to promise me.”

“Stop talking like you won’t be around,” she said, wiping her tears with the heel of her trembling hand.
His large, clammy hand wrapped around hers. His thumbed smoothed over her skin in soothing circles. “I’ll be with you in whatever capacity the Force allows.”

“No, that’s not good enough! You’re a part of me. Losing you would be like losing half of myself. Please, don’t leave me like they did…,” her voice faltered as she sobbed.

"Rey...nothing can ever destroy this bond, not even death.” She felt more Force drawn from around them as Ben gasped deep breaths. “Thousands of stars separated us…but we always found our way back to each other. You know...there is no amount of distance that can keep me from you. I'll just be a part of the Force around you instead...just like Luke. I’ll come back. You'll never be alone,” he promised, managing a half-smile as he gently wiped the tears from her face.

Why is he more concerned about me than that he's... dying?

Dying.

“You have to stay with me, to get me to a medbay, Ben.”

A gentle smile warmed his lips. “Finn will make it to you in time; I can feel it.”

Gasping against another wave of suffocating fear, she clutched fiercely to the comfort of their bond, but she found little comfort there. The physical pain that had been slipping through his mental barriers, streaming steadily across their connection, had disappeared. The cold was yielding to calming numbness. His heartbeat had weakened, his breathing slowed. She could not feel his strong life force any longer. He was fading fast. She ran her fingers through his dark hair, trying to come to terms with the possibility of losing him. His eyes fluttered as he struggled to maintain consciousness.

Her voice wavered, matching the trembling in her fingers. “Please don’t do this. Don’t go where I can’t follow,” she said, fighting to breathe under the weight of her despair. “You told me we could be together now. We have the whole galaxy to see, remember?”

A sad smile grew on his lips. Yeah? he said through their bond, his words the echo of a memory. What would we do?

A sob hitched in her throat as she remembered the dream and all they had imagined of a life
together. She wished she had stayed in the dream, where her greatest fear was whether Ben would turn. The words had given her hope of a life with him back then, but they had taken on an entirely different meaning as she watched his life fade from his eyes. Ben had known then; it had always been just a dream. They would never have that life, because he wouldn’t be there to live it with her.

*You’re supposed teach me how to swim, remember?* she said across the bond, refusing to give life to the painful words. *So you can bring me to those underwater caves. And show me the archives, and read me your favorite holobooks. And take me to gardens and buffets and parades with fireworks and caves filled with crystals. And we’re supposed to spar with training sabers every day and learn everything about the Force. And you’re supposed to teach me how to play chess and cards, and I’m supposed to teach you how to build a speeder and garden.*

Sobs wracked through her body as he nodded in agreement, pressing his lips together to contain his own sorrow as he dried her tears. *And we’re supposed to be pilots and work for your Uncle Lando. You’re supposed to take me across the galaxy and show me every beautiful thing you’ve ever seen.*

*I would have taken you to Chandrila, I would have shown you the real Lake Andrasha. I would have shown you the ocean and the crystal caves and the meadows. You would love how green it is there. I would have taken you to Naboo and Kashyyk, and you would love the Ewoks on Endor—*

*Then we ’ll do it; we’ll go there, together.*

*No matter what, I want you to go. Promise me you’ll go.*

“I promise,” she cried. Her hands cupped his face, showing him the sincerity in her eyes. She knew how important promises were to him.

“But, Ben, I need you there, too. You’re supposed to put my hair in braids every day.” She released a shuddered exhale as she suppressed her sobs, “and I’m supposed to complain because you have fat fingers, and you pull it too tight, and it takes entirely too long.”

He huffed a soft, wheezing laugh, smiling through tears. *You’ll learn,* the soft timbre of his voice said in her mind. *And at the end of the day, when you close your eyes as you take them all out, I’ll be there. Every night I’ll hold you until the morning, so you’ll never have nightmares again.*”
His words were too painful to hear. Just imagining a life without him was a nightmare she wasn’t prepared to face. Rey shook her head, laying her head against his chest to listen to the beat of his heart. It wasn’t as comforting as she had hoped. The steady beat she had come to know so well was too soft and slow. No amount of wishing or pleading or fighting for him would save him. The realization finally pierced through the thick shield of hope she had been clinging to so desperately. When he spoke again, his eyes fluttered as his grip loosened on the consciousness that he had been clinging to desperately.

*I’m sorry.*

“I know.”

His body tensed at the sound of her voice, disorientation rattling through the bond. His eyes twitched as he struggled to focus on her, and, when he did, he stared at her with confusion. He rambled incoherently in different languages she was unfamiliar with, if they were true languages at all. He may have still been breathing, but her Ben was disappearing before her eyes.

Rey may have been naïve about certain galactic wisdom, but she had seen enough death on Jakku. Wayward travelers would find themselves lost in the planet’s unforgiving deserts, succumbing to the temperatures long before the creatures scavenged upon their bodies. As their bodies shut down from dehydration, they would become delirious—almost, intoxicated—behaving as if they had just stepped out of the local cantina. From a young age, she was taught that if she had happened upon a soul who had reached such a stage, it was best to leave them. They already rested in Death’s shadow. No amount of precious resources would save them.

This was not some wayward traveler, however. This was Ben, and she couldn't let him go. She couldn't allow his last words to be the promise that she would never be alone. No, he had to live, so he could prove it to her.

“Ben, what about the bond?! What if it’s like the bond between your mother and Luke?” she asked desperately. “Your mother died because she could not live without Luke! Our bond is stronger. You know that we can feel each other’s pain. What if the bond is too strong for me to survive your death?” The fading of his eyes brightened momentarily as recognition—and then fear—flashed across them.

*It’s not too late; Ben is still in there.* “Please don’t give up.”
The Force vibrated around them, and she realized he was drawing it in, using it to fight Death itself. Clarity returned to his eyes as he battled exhaustion. She had given them more time to reach Finn; she had given him the will to fight. She knew that her life was more important to him than anything.

*We’ll be on the Falcon soon. Please. Stay with me.*

“If you want to save me, you can’t leave me.” His fear spiked again with her words, and with that fear, strength. She sighed in relief. *You can do this Ben. You’ve survived much worse. Please hold on.* He smiled weakly, letting his love and devotion pour into her through the bond. The light was bright, warm, soothing. She felt a glimmer of hope as she sensed his steely resolve. She should have known, however, that Ben was not Ben without that streak of heartbreaking unpredictability. A dark shadow passed over his features as he blinked tears from his eyes. Remorse and heartache flooded the bond.

*Forgive me, Rey,* his deep, soothing voice murmured in her mind. Shutting his eyes, his hand moved up her cheek to her temple. The last time he had broken her heart with those words, he had injected himself with poison. She felt a splitting pain through her mind as his focused settled on their bond.

*No...he couldn’t possibly....*

The pain intensified, becoming almost blinding. Sheer will and determination rattled the bond. He had made up his mind; there was not an ounce of conflict in him this time. His resolution focused on the glowing band that connected them.

*It’s not possible. Our bond is unbreakable!*

The memory of Luke’s voice whispered through her head. *I have never heard of breaking a bond. It would take a strength more powerful than the Force itself....* Ben could try, but he wouldn’t break their bond; all he could do was fight. *There is nothing greater than the Force.* As if in response, she felt the tendrils of the bond—rooted in her soul—fracture under his unyielding determination…and love. As he tore their souls apart, all she could feel was his love.

“Ben! No!” She grasped wildly in the Force to find their bond. Something powerful snapped deep within her soul. She heaved from the loss, her connection to him severed.
It was impossible, but he had done it. He had destroyed the bond. Emptiness flooded into the comforting place in her mind that he had once occupied. Why? Why would you do that? She collapsed onto his chest.

“What have you done!? You said our bond could never be destroyed!” she sobbed. “What if it was the only way to save you? What if it was the only way for you to come back to me? What if breaking our bond means I’ll never see you again? Ben, what have you done?”

His breaths were gasping and rapid. He had weakened himself further through his struggle to end the bond. “I love you, Rey...I’m so sorry...it destroys me...to lose my connection to you...But I can’t take that chance...with your life...even if it means...I never get to see you again.” She shook her head through tears. The absence of his presence in her mind burned with agony in her soul. It was the worst torment she had ever suffered, and he was still alive. What would that emptiness do to her if she lost him? How could she live through that pain for the rest of her life? She couldn’t imagine a life without him in it; she didn’t want to imagine it.

Now that he knew she was safe, the light began to fade in his eyes again. His draw from the Force slowed. He was letting go. But she wouldn’t allow him to leave her behind. "I don't want to live without you. If you can't stay, then...I want to go with you. If we can't be together here, then we can be together in the Force. We can end this together, I’ll put my saberstaff between us and we can—"

He shook his head as his heaving breaths softened. “No, Rey...Live...for me...We’ll see each other again.”

“I want to be with you, Ben, now. It’s my choice, not yours. You can’t stop me if I choose to follow. I won’t let you abandon me, too.” Resentment twisted into the sorrow in her voice but faded away as tears shined in his eyes and his lip quivered.

"No...Stay here...I'll come back for you.” His voice, strained and barely more than a whisper, was kind and calm. He didn’t sound like Ben this way, the fatal exhaustion evident in every word, but she couldn’t reject the pestering thought that this voice was familiar in a different way.

Come back? No. That will never be good enough. I don’t want you to come back, Ben. I want you to stay. I love you too much to let you leave me.
Ben looked up and away from her. "Mom?" he rasped. Even if Rey hadn't heard him, she would have felt the change in energy in the shuttle. *Please, Leia, please help me save him.* Leia's presence should have been warning enough, but nothing would have prepared her for the moment she sensed a heavy, powerful-yet-peaceful, all-encompassing void consuming the air in the shuttle like a black hole.

*No!*

They had run out of time.

"Promise me, Ben! Promise me you'll come back for me! I don’t want to live the rest of my life without you in it!" She begged him in desperation, sobbing into his chest. She grasped onto his shirt, as if holding him there would keep him with her. He wrapped his large hand over her fist, clutching her tightly against him.

"I'll come back, sweetheart...I promise," he whispered, his voice was harrowed, but earnest. A chilling numbness trickled down her spine. She sat up slowly and stared into his soft, fading eyes. Those words were eerily familiar...from a memory...or a dream. The realization stole the very breath from her lips, as the walls of the compartment seemed to close in upon her. Hearing indiscernible shouts, her eyes flickered to a First Order propaganda holoprojection on the viewport. The viewer was charging through a forest in snow, searching for enemies as gunfire sounded in the distance.

“It was you.”

It had always been...him. She had been wrong; it hadn’t been a voice from her past as she had first assumed, and it hadn’t been an illusion—a manifestation of hope she had imagined in her denial—as she had convinced herself. It had been the *future.*

Her mind reeled as she realized that they were destined for this moment before they had ever met. Had he seen this, too? She wanted to ask him if he had known all along how this would end, but she felt a tormentingly familiar heaviness in the Force that splintered through her soul. The hand that had been tightly grasping hers went limp, releasing a shiny, golden object. It bounced down to the floor as a hollow sigh escaped his lips.

“No, Ben!” she screamed, grasping for him in the Force. The light in his eyes faded as they slowly fluttered shut—curtains closing on the final act of a lifetime of suffering. His last heartbeat echoed through her soul—a scar forever tattooed on her own heart—shattering her hope to pieces. His fierce, powerful energy flickered and evanesced into the Force around them. She threw her hand
over her mouth and dared not to breathe as she waited. She was listening for another heartbeat, for
his chest to rise again once more, for his energy to return to his limp body.

Then there was nothing.

She shook her head in denial. “No, no, no, no, please, no, Ben.”

Rey cried out—a broken, primal howl—into the emptiness of the escape craft, picking up her
lightsaber and throwing it at the holoprojector. The projection flickered away, and she was left in
silent darkness, only stars visible through the viewports. It had only been a breath without him, but
it was already the greatest loneliness she had ever endured in her lifetime of solitude. She kissed
his forehead and smoothed her fingers over his hair, hoping that he would suddenly take a breath
and his comforting energy would restore the void in her soul. “Ben?”

I looked away for a few seconds! Why would you leave me when I didn’t get a chance to say
goodbye! Why didn’t you warn me? I thought we had more time!

It had happened so fast when she was distracted by her revelation that it felt connected…as if she
had kept him alive—no, suffering—through sheer will. Perhaps he had known she wouldn’t let him
go; perhaps he hadn’t wanted her to see him die, so he waited. Perhaps he had fought with
everything in him, using the Force to hold on as his mother had. It didn’t matter why; he left
without saying goodbye. That means it can’t be goodbye. You can’t be gone; love has to be
enough. He promised her that he would come back. His body had not disappeared as his mother’s
had. Rey believed that had to mean something.

You promised me. You have to come back.

The silence was deafening. For the first time, she noticed the unsettling sensation of the absence of
sound as she drifted in the isolation of open space. The sudden wail brought forth from her lips was
almost comforting in the nothingness. Her body convulsed through sobs as she waited by his side
for something to happen...for the bond to return....for him to come back and tell her it would be all
right. She tried in desperation to reach him in the Force, to search his mind for the knowledge of
the Force to help him, but there was nothing.

"Ben?" she begged, shaking him feverishly. "Ben? What have you done? I can't feel you! Where
are you? Come back! Please! Come back to me!" She sat back on her heels and cried out in anger.
Only then did she glance down at the dark stain on her hands. Only then did she notice the cardinal
pool surrounding them in a halo of death. Her heartache burst from her throat in a devastated
scream that deteriorated into broken sobs as she collapsed onto his silent chest.
Brief discussion of suicide

Violent death

Major character death

Update: Please, remember that I wrote this before TROS, I had no idea they would end it the way they did. But this one will hurt, especially after grieving the cannon ending. I did warn about the angst, but I’m still sorry. The next few chapters will be rough as characters explore grief.
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Blue stared out at the vast number of stars in the inky purple sky. They were giant spheres of heated gas; they did not interest him before. There could be no interesting knowledge gained from stars. He had been created on a Starship, but he had never spent time looking out the viewports. Blue watched people instead; they interested him. He understood now why Master spent hours while the other lifeforms were powered down to stare at something as ordinary as the stars. When Blue asked why, Master would say he was "just thinking." Blue thought Master was thinking about the Girl. When he would lie on his bed, in the moments his energy stores were lowest, Master would tell him he missed the Girl.

When Blue asked what it felt like to "miss" another being, Master told him it was like waiting indefinitely. Blue waited for Master when he was busy doing what the bad people wanted. He preferred to go with Master, so he understood that waiting was unpleasant. Master said this waiting was different; he was waiting for her to come back, and it caused him to hurt, like when he would bleed. Except this hurt, Master said, was on the inside. Blue had not understood what this "hurt" felt like, but he knew it was not good. Master did not smile or laugh or play holochess with him on the days he missed the Girl the most. As Blue stared out at the galaxy from the shuttle cockpit, he knew what waiting felt like. He missed Master.

The others told him he was a "machine." They said he couldn’t “feel;” he couldn’t "die," because he wasn’t “alive.” Blue knew the definitions of the words, and he thought the others were wrong. Master told him he was alive, and Master said truthful words even when it caused the Girl to raise her voice volume and throw things. Master was good, even if he said he was "bad." Master was different than the Bad General. The Bad General did not "feel" like Master did. Blue did not understand the complexities of human emotion, but Master was as strong with emotions as he was with the weapons he trained with. If Blue could feel like humans, he would choose to feel like Master.

There was one emotion—love—that Blue had read about the most, and he knew Master felt love for the Girl. There was something different in Master’s eyes when he looked at the Girl; he smiled when he talked about her, he thought about her when she was not there, and most of his decisions—good or bad—were made with her in mind. At first, Blue believed it was happiness. Overhearing them say goodbye, though, he knew now it was more. It was love. Maybe love was a lot of things, but Blue believed love was when it hurt to say goodbye. Master told him that he could feel, too. If Blue could feel love, then he loved Master, because nothing had ever been as hard as saying goodbye to him.
Master was right; he was alive, and he could feel. That was why Blue was certain he was dying. He knew lifeforms had to be physically broken to die. Though the lightsaber had affected several of his drives, that was not what felt broken. Master had told him he was good, but he did not understand why he used those words instead of saying goodbye. Blue knew of death; he knew that if Master had not rescued him from the garbage chute, he would not exist anymore. He also knew that even though the Girl was screaming in hurt next to Master in the passenger compartment, asking him to "come back," Master did not exist anymore. Master would never share his fire with him again, and that made Blue feel broken in ways faulty parts never had before.

Blue did not want Master to be gone; he did not want to wait for him to come back. Blue did not want to play chess without Master, even though it was his favorite. Was this hurt? The Girl was good, she was nice to him, she fixed him. When the Bad men were around, they made Master do bad things. Blue knew the Bad men made the Girl do bad things, too. The Girl did not want to break Blue, but she did. Now she was broken, too. Blue wanted to fix it, but he did not think he could fix this. The Girl missed Master, too, and what would fix it if he could not bring him back? Would she be broken forever? Would Blue?

Blue heard Master tell the Girl to take care of him. He would go with her, but she was not the same. Master read to him from holobooks and told him stories about heroes and adventures. Blue’s favorites were stories about a lonely little boy who wanted to be good. Master found him other droids to play with and told Blue he didn’t have to obey him like the lifeforms that made him mad. Sometimes when it was dark, Master took him on walks around the ship, and they didn’t say anything, but Blue would always choose to go. Memories with Master were his favorite memories. The Girl could not do those things like Master. The Girl was good, but she was not Master. That made Blue feel broken; that meant he was dying, too.

Would any lifeforms miss Blue when he was gone? Would he die like Master did; would it be fast? Would it hurt? Would he know when he died, or would he simply be gone? What happened after Master died? Where did he go? Would Blue get to go there, too? That would be happiness, Blue decided, if he got to follow Master wherever he went. Yes, he missed Master. Did Master miss him, too?
Chapter End Notes

Discussion of death/grief
First Steps

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“Ben?”

“Are you there?

Nothing.

The galaxy around them ceased to exist when Ben exhaled his last breath. Rey was lost in a paradox of contradictions. It wasn't real—it couldn't be real. Yet, simultaneously, it was the deepest, most honest reality she had ever faced. Time was no longer a reliable measurement of calculated units in exact intervals, ticking predictably into an indefinite future. Rey lived an entire lifetime in those moments with Ben in the silence of the escape shuttle, but in the blink of an eye, their last moments together would be over—only a blip in her lifetime without him. Every second she spent with him was prolonged torture, but there weren't enough seconds left until she would have to let him go. Her mind was gripped by a thick, unrelenting fog, but every emotion cut with aching clarity into the depths of her soul. She both wanted to die, to be with him, and to live, to tell the story of the man behind the mask.

She refused to leave Ben to help Blue pilot the shuttle. If the ship fell into Ilum's gravitational pull and she met her fate on its icy surface, so be it. Staying with him, in that moment between his last words and their inevitable separation, was her only reality. “Ben,” she whispered to him softly. “You have to wake up. I can't lose you. I don't know what to do without you. There's so much left for us to do together; you have to come back. This isn't fair. You promised never to leave me alone.” She wiped away the blood that stained his cheek, dried the tears that were still pooled in the corners of his eyes. His features were reposed in eternal peace. It was easy for her to pretend that he was only sleeping...to pretend that he would still wake up. “Please, please, please, Ben. Just open your eyes.” She willed it with every cell in her body as she knelt in his blood, pulling him onto her lap to be close to him, grasping his lifeless body in a final embrace.

She imagined his eyelids fluttering open, the softness in those big, brown eyes as he stared up at her, smiling, whispering her name in reverence with the voice she would give anything to hear one more time. “Wake up,” she begged, as she frantically swept her fingers through his blood-soaked hair. “I'll do anything, I promise, even if you never want to see me again; I just want to know you’re okay. Please...just wake up, Ben.”

Since she was young, Rey willed things to happen. She had made impossible leaps, survived through formidable storms and—once the Force had reawakened inside her—manipulated the Force in ways she had never imagined. She had done it all because she believed she could. Her hope had been enough, except for what she had hoped for most—for her family to return. Now she could feel the desperation again as she searched the Force for a sign of life, willing his chest to rise and his heart to beat once more. She refused to let him go. Not now, not after Ben Solo had come back to save them all. This couldn’t be how their story ended. “Please, Ben!”
Rey grasped his blood-stained shirt, shaking him desperately, striking his motionless chest, screaming her pleas into the Cosmic Force. If the Force heard her, it did not heed her pleas. His eyes remained closed, his heart still, his lifeforce in a pool around them. As she breathed raggedly, her arms heavy with exhaustion, she only then admitted to herself how limp he felt in her arms. His face was his, but it wasn't. It looked unnatural, the face of an imposter— another clone. Only she knew with all her heart that it wasn't. There was something uniquely Ben that was missing, and she knew exactly what it was. His soul. “No,” she whimpered. “No, this can't be it. You can't be gone.”

Galaxies were created and destroyed in the moments she waited, silently begging for him to open his eyes. It hurt to imagine the love in his eyes she knew would have been there if he was alive, because she also knew she would never see it again. If love was enough, his heart would have resumed its steady beats that she still remembered like a love song in her soul. But love was not enough. She could have stayed there, never leaving that shuttle, waiting over a decade in self-imposed denial as she had done with her parents, and it wouldn't have changed the truth her aching heart knew with every beat. As intensely as she imagined, as deeply as she hoped, he would not gasp for the breath she desperately waited for. His eyes would remain unseeing, eyelids forever shut. She would never hear his voice again. As profoundly as she wanted to pretend differently, Ben Solo was dead, his life taken by her own lightsaber, because of her choices and her darkness.

“I'm sorry,” she sobbed. “I'm so sorry.”

She gazed upon his features with a new clarity. She had abandoned the hope that his eyes would flutter open, that his lips would whisper, “I love you,” or capture hers in a passionate kiss. She knew she would never again see his brows furrowed in brooding vexation, and, as infuriating as it had been before, she yearned to see it one last time. She yearned to commit it to memory, because memories were all she had left.

She scanned his pale face, missing the color and warmth of life. She counted every freckle, every mole, every scar. Tracing her fingers down her scar, she softened her touch, knowing how it agitated him. She wished she had thought to memorize in their last moments together the minute twitch of his expressions, the exact color of his eyes, the vibration of his energy in the Force.

Though she remembered them, she never quite appreciated them—not like she would have appreciated them after he was gone. She knew, all too soon, that even the vessel that once was Ben would be taken from her. She would have nothing left to hold onto. As she stared at his deathly pallor, she wondered if this was truly the way she wanted to remember him...the way he would have wanted to be remembered. She reluctantly slid him from her lap with a sob, knowing it was the first step in saying goodbye. She refused to imagine the moment when they took him away from her.
I need a teacher. Teach me how to let you go, Ben.

Dragging him away from the pool of blood, she gently rested his body on the floor, straightening his clothes to the best of her abilities. She lay next to him, tucking herself into the crook of his shoulder. If she stared out the large viewport, it was almost as if she were back on Barkhesh, and he was talking to her from across the galaxy. She could nearly hear the deep rumble of his voice as he recited his knowledge of the stars. Rey turned to press her face into his shirt and inhaled deeply, breathing him in, soothing the ache in her chest with its familiarity. A bright star caught her attention, and she almost asked him its name before catching herself. No, she was not on Barkesh, and he was not across the galaxy. They were finally together, just as she'd wanted. And he was dead, just as he said he would be.

The stars around them were tauntingly bright, continuing on as if her entire universe hadn't just ended. She wondered if his energy was out there among them somewhere, a brilliant supernova of fierce and unpredictable volatility. She focused on the purple-black spaces between the stars, the nothingness that reflected the void in her soul. She had never noticed before that there was so much more darkness in the galaxy than light. She was so focused on the stars that she never noticed the endless shadow between them.

But without the darkness, we would never see the stars. You knew that, didn't you?

“What am I supposed to do without you?” She lifted his lifeless hand, interlocking her fingers with his. “Why does everyone I ever love leave me? How do I live a life when half my soul is missing? Where are you, Ben?”

As the shuttle rotated through space, one of Ilum's bright moons came into view. She found herself singing to him softly, the song acquiring an entirely new meaning, but the sound was comforting, filling the tormenting silence of the escape shuttle and the agonizing emptiness in her mind.

“Mirrorbright, shines the moon,
it's glow as soft as an ember
When the moon is mirrorbright,
take this time to remember
Those you have loved but are gone
Those who kept you so safe and warm
The mirrorbright moon lets you see
Those who have ceased to be
Mirrorbright shines the moon,
as fires die to their embers
Those you love are with you still-
The moon will help you remember.”

She was startled from her thoughts when she heard the unmistakable sound of another ship
surround them. “The Falcon is here, Ben. It’s over. You did it. We’re home.” She ran her fingers
over the palm of his hand. It felt foreign to her—lacking the intense heat that had at some point in
the last few weeks changed from the burning hatred of an enemy to the passionate comfort of a
lover. She squeezed her interlocked fingers with his. “I love you,” she whispered. There was no
spark of energy this time.

The emergency shuttle jolted as it connected with the freighter. Part of her wanted them to leave
her out there. They could float away through space together. If she went on board, they would take
Ben away. She didn’t want to let him go. She just wanted to lie there with him until forever.

She had almost forgotten Blue was in the shuttle until he rolled around the corner. They stared at
each other for a moment, acknowledging the profound grief they shared before Blue turned away
to face the shuttle hatch. Muffled voices shouted in excitement outside the escape craft.

She sat up abruptly, facing the hatch, her arm possessively protecting Ben. The hatch opened and
her friends’ smiles disappeared. Rose clasped her hand over her mouth and turned away. It was not
necessary to study the carnage on the floor to find the truth—all it required was a single glance at
the broken sorrow in her eyes. Beebee-Ate approached the shuttle, speaking softly in binary, and
with one last swivel of his dome head, Blue left his master behind.

"Rey..." Finn extended a hand to her and waited patiently, tears in his eyes. She shook her head, but
he only extended his open hand further. I can't leave him. She shook her head more fervently, her
eyes pleaded with him. “I know,” he said, his voice strained as he attempted to be strong for her.
“But he's gone.” She stared at his open palm until it blurred. Her thoughts drifted back to the throne
room when she refused the hand of the man lying lifeless next to her. A broken whimper was torn
from somewhere deep inside her. She locked eyes with Finn and stood unsteadily, refusing to say
goodbye lest she never gain the nerve to leave him. She stepped away from the body of Ben
Organa Solo —their martyred hero...the dark, fallen Jedi...her bondmate...her love. Time was
moving forward without him, and with each step, so was she. That was the worst part of it all. It
felt like betrayal.

She grasped Finn’s warm, comforting hand, and he pulled her out of the escape craft. He wrapped
his arms around her immediately, and she fell to pieces in his strong embrace. She sobbed
incoherently about what had happened since they had been separated—finishing by questioning the
fairness of the Force, demanding to know why she had to play a role in his death, wondering why he had to be taken from her and lamenting a life without her soulmate. Finn may not have understood a word she said in her hysterics, but he held her in his arms until she finished. “I’m so sorry,” he breathed. Finn held her tightly against him without uttering another word. In that moment, they would have all been meaningless. Ben was dead, and he knew nothing he could say would change that. Rey knew that if he could have brought the former Supreme Leader back to her, he would have.

Sobs heaved through her body, her grief bleeding out with her tears until she felt empty. Finn soothed her until she was given the taste of peace again, and it almost felt like she had awoken from a horrific nightmare. Then her torturous mind would remind her in vivid detail that it was real, Ben was gone, dead, and the vicious cycle would begin again.

She was uncertain how long she cried into his shoulder, but Finn stood steadfast in his support until she released her grip on his shirt. He leaned over to Rose and whispered something to her. Rose immediately wrapped her arm around Rey, directing her deeper inside the Falcon. Rey glanced over her shoulder and watched Finn stifle a sob with his fist as he climbed into the escape shuttle.

“No!” she screamed with renewed vigor. Rose kept her arm tightly around her, but she wrestled out of her friend's grasp. “Let me go! I can't leave him!” she gasped between sobs. “Ben!”

“Rey…”

Rey turned to her friend, who had grabbed her shoulders to ground her. “Please, Rose, don't take him away from me!” She wrenched her shoulders from Rose's grip, sprinting back toward the escape craft. She couldn't hear what her friend was screaming or the sound of boots echoing off the floor behind her. All she could hear was the pounding of her own heart as she ran to the only person she had wanted to call “home.” She neared the hatch of the craft when she was jolted backward. Strong arms wrapped around her from behind and lifted her off her feet, dragging her away. She heard a grunt as she kicked back with ferocity, but the man did not release her. “No, I want Ben! Let me go! Ben! Come back! Ben!” she screamed until the escape craft was out of sight.

The strong arms set her down, still gripping her tightly. One arm wrapped around her front to immobilize her, while the other disappeared. There was a soft snapping sound, then a sharp sting in her arm. She looked down to see the end of a hypo-injector. With a push in the Force, she turned in his grasp and came face-to-face with the last person she wanted to see.

Poe Dameron.
“What did you just do?”

“It’s Vimidone,” he said, handing her the empty hypo-injector. “It’s used with Albozene to treat radiation poisoning, but alone it’s used as an antidote for spice overdoses. You’ll feel like hell for a bit, but you’ll be okay until we get you to a medbay.”

“I don’t care about the poison,” she shouted, attempting to struggle out of his grasp. “I need to be with Ben!”

“You have to let him go, Rey,” he attempted to reason with her through panting breaths. “He’s dead. That is just his body out there.”

“Get away from me!” She tried to push back with the Force, but the antidote coursing through her system made her light-headed and nauseous. “This is your fault!”

“I'll let you go if you promise not to run! I know you hate me, Rey. That's fine, I deserve it. The thing is, I don't hate you. I know it hurts, but you don't want to see him like that, trust me.”

“Trust you?” Rey's teeth were bared in preparation for a fight. Rose appeared around the corner and wrapped her arms around her friend, allowing Poe to release her.

“What is that monster doing here?” Rey cried into her shoulder. “He came here to kill Ben, didn't he?”

“No Rey...” Rose began, but Poe finished for her.

“I came here to thank him, Rey,” he said quietly, and she couldn’t help but search his face for the validity of his words. “You didn’t see it out there, we were....” Poe’s eyes lost focus as imaginary explosions flared brightly before his eyes.

“You set us up!” Her screams snapped him from his memory. “The Hutts almost killed us, and the First Order would have! If you hadn't set the trap, Ben wouldn't have been there! He would still be alive!”
“Yes, and we would all be dead. We would have lost the war with those shields in place. What Ben did, what you all did...it saved the galaxy. I didn't want this to happen, Rey. We waited longer than we should have to blow the reactor so he had a chance. When I saw your escape shuttle leave the Finalizer, I thought you and Ben were...” Poe's use of his given name gave her pause. She met his eyes for the first time, finding only sincerity and remorse there. “I'm sorry,” he offered, but Rey only glared at him with a darkening hatred that she wasn’t entirely certain he deserved anymore.

“You will pay for what you did. I will never forgive you.” Rey did not break eye contact until he looked to her friend for help. Rose gave Poe a pointed look and nodded. He sighed, shoulders slumped, then walked back toward the cockpit without uttering another word.

“Rey, Ben wouldn't want this,” Rose said gently, keeping an arm around her to guide them deeper into the ship. Rey wanted to find Ben, but she was too exhausted to fight back, and she knew her friend was right.

“Please, just don't let him fly this ship. It's not his father's ship. Ben should be here flying it, not him.”

Rose nodded. “An Alliance pilot is here, he’s been flying the ship, but if you want me to—”

“No, it’s fine.”

Does it matter? If Ben wasn’t there to pilot it, as long as Poe stayed away from the pilot’s chair, she didn’t care what happened to the Millennium Falcon. She didn’t care if she never saw it again. The Falcon looked...different...than she remembered. What had once felt like home seemed hollow and lifeless through her eyes. The ghosts of the past laughed in their happiness as disembodied feet ran down the halls. It was all mocking her. She suddenly hated the junker ship. Perhaps this was what Ben had felt.

It had given her such hope as she flew away from her lonely life on Jakku, fleeing the wrath of Kylo Ren. It had brought Finn and Han to save her on Starkiller, after she had been kidnapped by the man she once only saw as a monster. It had saved their lives as they escaped the planet's destruction, after shutting the door on a physically broken Kylo Ren, hatred in his eyes. Sometime between then and the next time she had shut the door on him on Crait, emotionally broken with eyes of betrayal, she had found the man beneath the mask of Kylo Ren.

It had delivered her to the disappointment of Luke and the lonely nights that nurtured an unexpected intimacy between her and her bondmate. It brought her to him on the Supremacy in hope of saving him and brought the Resistance to safety, when she realized that only he could save
himself. The ship had brought her to the forsaken world they were orbiting. It had brought Ben to her on the Finalizer. And now it would be Ben's ephemeral sepulcher until they were permanently separated. The ship had become a symbol of her bond with Ben, and now it was a tormenting reminder of what could have been. She wandered the corridors in a daze, replaying the details in her mind in excruciating detail.

Rose was silent—perhaps to give Rey a moment alone with her thoughts, or perhaps because there was nothing left to say. Rey would have to spend the rest of her life without the man she loved. There was nothing she could say that would change that. Rose brought her to a bunk and laid her down gently. She sat down next to her and tenderly swept the hair from Rey’s face.

You should be here to brush the hair from my face, Ben! You should be here with me! Where are you?

The thought caused her throat to tighten, and another wave of grief crashed over her. “I think I’m going to be sick,” Rey said weakly. Rose nodded in understanding, a look of pity falling over her features. Rey hadn't noticed whether she said anything before she left, but she felt the emptiness in the room when she was gone.

Luke! Leia! Anyone, please! Rey screamed into the Force. I need your help! I can't feel Ben! Help me find him! He promised he would come back to me.

She closed her eyes, searching the Force for the familiar vibrations. There was a change of energy in the room, and for one split second full of hope, she thought he had come back to her. When her eyelids fluttered open, there was a blue aura flickering in front of her. Her sanguine eyes settled on the apparition of Luke Skywalker instead. He was quiet, studying her. Her anger replaced the hollow ache in her chest.

“Where were you?” she growled. “Why didn’t you warn us? Why didn’t you help us? Why didn’t you save him while he was dying on the bottom of that shuttle!”

He took her anger in stride. “Look at me, kid, I’m dead,” he said with a gentle huff. Rey was in no mood for humor, however, so he softened his tone when he spoke again. “Without a high concentration in the Force, we are limited in our control over energy in the physical plain. You were too far from the forces on Ilum for the miracle you were hoping for. There was nothing I could have done to save him, Rey.”

Rey shook her head, refusing to believe that it had always been hopeless. “You could have done something.”
“This isn’t our fight anymore,” he said, his blue eyes filled with pain and regret. “It’s yours. This was his destiny.”

“How?” she cried. “How is it his destiny to die? You and Han and Leia sacrificed yourselves to save him! He finally chose the right path. How is this the ending the Force chose for the Skywalkers? Why does Sidious get to win?”

“He didn’t win —”

“He did,” she retorted bitterly.

Luke sighed, nodding. It did nothing to soothe her pain. It wasn’t fair that everything they had fought to save was lost. “What I came here to say is this: you are strong—stronger than you know. There is still a lot of good you can do for the galaxy. Don’t allow Ben’s death to be in vain. Don’t lose your hope, Rey.”

She felt none of that strength as she sobbed into her hands. It was easy to pretend that they were arguing about someone else when they didn’t say his name. But the mention of “Ben” and “death” in the same sentence drained the anger sparking in her veins. Her argument with Luke had been a welcome distraction. If for only a few moments, she could pretend her soul had not been broken in two, she could pretend it was a nameless face they were arguing about, she could pretend that Ben wasn’t dead.

“Where is he?” her voice croaked as she lifted her head to search his eyes. “Why has he not come back like he promised?”

Luke’s mouth twitched with sympathy. “He would if he could, Rey.” A tidal wave of fear, denial, and nausea crashed upon her, drowning her in the closest approximation to Hell she could imagine. She shook her head. That was not the answer she had expected.

Please, no.

“What do you mean ‘if he could,’” her voice was weak and wavering under the weight of her torment. Somewhere deep inside her, she already knew the answer. “W-where is he?”
“Believe it or not, even I do not understand the inner workings of the Force,” the levity in his voice stoked a renewed fire within her, but before she could lash out, he continued, “I don't know where he is or why it has to be this way. I know that he did not release his soul to the Force when he died. You both used…an incredible amount of power in the Force to extend his death, to the point that a surge of power was felt by Force users across the galaxy. There wasn’t a Force user alive or dead that didn’t feel your cries when he died.”

Good, Rey thought, they should all know my pain.

“It is possible he waited too long or fought death for your sake,” Luke said, “and, in doing so, surrendered the ability to keep his promise to you. All I know is his mother came for him, like I did for her, but he did not go with her. We’re still looking for him; Leia would never give up on her son, and this time, I won’t either. But wherever he is, he’s not here, Rey. Ben can’t come back to you the way you want, but we all know he would if he could.” The flickering hope in her soul extinguished in an instant. An all-consuming numbness leached into the shattered remnants of her heart. “So I came to tell you what he would want you to know; Rey, you may not be able to have him in your life…but you can still live for him. Everything he suffered will be for nothing if you fall to darkness, too. He wouldn't want to see you….”

“I don't care!” she shouted. “I don’t care! I don’t care! You have no idea what he wanted! You have no idea who he was or who I am! Just...leave!” She dropped her head to her hands.

You know nothing of darkness, Luke. You know nothing of true love. If that evil, genocidal psycho promised to erase all this pain if I joined the dark side, I don’t know if I would be strong enough not to make the same choice Ben did. I almost gave up on the Finalizer. I would have gone with Sidious if Ben hadn’t done what he did. I would have sworn my loyalty to him to save Ben. I know I can’t trust Sidious to bring Ben back, but I can imagine the lengths I would go if I could trust him. I would do just about anything. If you were alive, Luke, I would kill you if it brought Ben back. I guess everyone has their price.

Darkness howled in her veins. She was not surprised when she raised her head and Luke was no longer standing before her. She did not expect, however, for Rose to be in his place. Concern was etched across her face, her hands trembling around the waste receptacle she was holding.

You need to tell Finn and Rose and Maz and anyone that you can about this darkness, okay? Ben had told her before he left her. They’ll help you. My mistake was keeping the voices and my darkness a secret. I was terrified of what they would think, what they would say. Don’t you do that, Rey. Do you understand? Even when you're at your weakest, you don't listen to the darkness, okay? You need to promise me.
“I…I just told Luke I would kill him if it brought Ben back,” she said to her friend. “I don’t know who I am anymore, Rose. What is my place in this life...without him?”

“You are a hero, Rey. The First Order has collapsed. The Finalizer was destroyed during the implosion of the reactor. The flotillas around the galaxy have fallen to similar fates. There were hundreds of stormtroopers like Finn who defected. The galaxy is saved, because you never gave up hope. You are the Jedi we all knew you would be, that’s who you are.” Rey knew Rose was just trying to help, but she didn’t care about the Resistance, the First Order, or the galaxy. She only wanted him.

“I am no hero. All I had to do was save him, all I had to do was get to the ignition switch first, but I failed,” she whispered. Rose looked at her tenderly, but Rey felt resentment rise in her throat.

*You don’t understand. The man you love is fine! The man you love is dragging the body of the man I love onto this ship right now!*

Rose gently rubbed her back. “You’re also our family, Rey. Your place will always be with us. You matter, too. You nearly lost your life, and we are all so thankful you’re safe.”

“I don’t care if I’m safe; Ben should be safe. After the torture and lifetime of whispers in his head, he finally turned on his own. He didn’t deserve for it to end like this! If he had never met me, he would alive. I was the one who pushed him to leave the First Order, I was the one who brought him back to the fight, I was the one who got hurt on the skyway, I was the one who wouldn't listen about Sidious. It was my weapon that took his life, and there is nothing I can do to change that.”

Rose was quiet as Rey released her misplaced anger, her eyes never losing their softness. “This is not your fault, Rey. I’m sorry that he didn't make it; we all are. We know how much you love him, and how much he loves you. It's not fair that it ended the way it did. But no matter what happened, you tried to save him. He knows that. Guilt is an awful burden to carry, and I believe he wouldn't want you to bear it. You did save him…from the dark side. He died a hero. Your love for each other saved the galaxy. I will be forever thankful to him for that,” Rose answered softly. Rey wanted her sage words to be enough,

“He is never coming back, and it's all my fault.” Rose was quiet for a moment as she weighed her friend's admission, but it was another voice that broke the silence.

“You can’t do this to yourself, Rey; it isn’t your fault,” Poe said as he leaned against the wall, staring off down the corridor.
“Poe—” Rose warned, but he cut her off.

“I know, Rose. I’ll leave her alone, but she needs to hear this first.” Poe turned back toward Rey. “I can’t live with myself knowing you think this is your fault. You were right before: I’m to blame for what happened to him. Nothing you did or didn’t do on the Finalizer would have made a difference, he would have died regardless. Rey, the tea I gave you….”

She wasn’t paying attention to his useless platitudes until he mentioned the tea. Her eyes snapped up to his, but he refused to look at her or continue.

“Tell me.” It was more growl than Basic.

“What he did with the virus was smart,” Poe said, and every word set fire to the darkness inside her. “It could only infect those with that one particular DNA sequence. Anyone else who contracted the virus would be carriers. When I saw the clones were his, I knew he had used his own DNA to create them, so I knew the virus could infect him, too.”

“What did you do?!?”

Poe reflexively rubbed at his brow, exhaling slowly. “The tea I gave you had the remaining drop from the vial inside it. The moment he was within a meter of you, his death was an inevitability.” Poe’s voice faded to a whisper. “Nothing you did on the Finalizer would have changed that. I killed Ben. Blame me.”

Rose narrowed her eyes at him in confusion. “But Poe, you have the antido—”

He silenced her with his eyes and turned back to Rey. “It’s my fault. Hate me.”

Poe had used her more than she had previously thought. Not only had he used her as bait to draw in the First Order; he had used her as a weapon. He had hedged his bets—either she would be the hero he wanted her to be and kill Ben with her lightsaber in an ambush, or she would disappoint him and kill Ben with the very virus he had entrusted her with. No matter what she did, he would have died in her arms. Poe finally met her disgusted stare. “Murderer,” she growled. “You don’t care about anyone, do you? I shouldn’t be surprised. You killed children. Ben was just another clone to—”
The realization that settled over her was heavy with consequence. The hope that had withered and died with her bondmate slowly bloomed with new life. “Take me to Kamino,” she whispered.

The contrition on Poe’s face twisted into confusion. “Why?”

“All the clones are dead, but they would still have his DNA,” she said as she tried to piece together a plan through the fog of grief and darkness. The clones—they looked just like him. It would be as if the events on the Finalizer never happened. “We can bring him back to life.”

“Rey,” Rose warned. “You saw those clones; they weren’t Ben.”

“I’ll take the clone to the other Force Destiny. I’ll use the machine to reincarnate him!” Rey was already thinking twenty steps ahead. She would stay on Kamino, wait for the clone to grow into an adult, find the machine where Sidious said it was located on Jakku, and bring him back again. It would be agony waiting for him, but she was good at waiting. It would work. It would work. She could save him.

The intensity of her hope was stronger than it ever had before. She could feel the light surrounding her. The future looked bright, and she could imagine their life together, but then Poe said those four, undeniable words. “It’s all destroyed, Rey.”

“No! How do you know –”

“Because, damn it, Rey, I was there,” he said, his voice cracking in what must have been anger. “I didn’t want them to have a chance to create another army, so I had a young clone show me where they kept the tubes with his genetic code. I destroyed it all.”

Rose turned, staring at him with a look Rey didn’t understand. “What about the—”

“No!” he snapped, glaring at Rose. “Did you hear her? What she wants – no.” When she didn’t continue, his heated stare shifted to Rey. “It wouldn’t work.”
The tears began to fall again, and Rey swiped at them angrily. “How do you know it wouldn’t
work??”

“Because Ben warned me about the machine when he was on the Falcon!” he shouted. “Force
Destiny won’t bring him back. You need an object imprinted with his soul. And even if you had
that and a clone, Force Destiny is a dark side machine. You don’t have any idea what that machine
is capable of, and you know he wouldn’t want to risk the galaxy again for you to play Cosmic
Force. He’s gone, Rey. And I’m sorry for the role I played, but nothing is bringing him back.”

Silence fell between them. No one moved. Rey’s eyes were locked with Poe’s. The only sound in
the room was the steady hum of the engines and their heaving breaths.

“Is this what Ben would want?” Poe asked softly. It was like a dagger to her heart. Rey imagined
what Ben would say. You’re still holding on. Let go. The loss of her hope again was agonizing.

Rey would never tell him, but Poe was right. She didn’t have a clone or an object imbued with his
soul, any idea where Force Destiny was located, or the ability to operate it. There was hope and
there was denial, and she knew which one she was grasping desperately to hold onto.

“Maybe not,” she said, “but I know what I want. I want to never, ever see you again.” She stopped
herself from saying worse.

Poe hesitated, as if he was weighing his next words carefully, but then he nodded and left with
nothing more than “fine.” She felt the darkness slowly seeping in through the broken pieces of her
soul. She welcomed it. She wanted it to consume her until she didn’t feel any of it—the sorrow,
regret, guilt, and anger, the longing, fear, loneliness, and denial, the hopelessness—the darkness
could take all of it. She wanted to let it dig its claws into every last fiber of her being until she
never felt anything ever again. She didn’t care if she fell to darkness. Not anymore.

This is how you must have felt, Ben. This is how you became Kylo Ren. It’s so easy. I hate
everything and everyone. I don’t want to care about anything anymore. The darkness numbs the
pain. The darkness is the only good thing in my life right now. You knew this torture. You were so
scared for me, because you knew how hard it was to resist it. That’s why you begged me to resist it,
even though you could have had me by your side if I fell. You told me you would be here to help
me. But you’re not here now. Just as Luke pushed you to the darkness he feared in you, now I will
turn to the very darkness you feared in me. Because of you. You made your choice to leave me. You
should have stayed! You should have come back like you promised! She let the comfort of darkness
flow through her. It devoured her torment, filling the suffocating emptiness until she was able to
catch her breath, if only for a moment.

She barely registered Rose's voice until she heard her former general’s name mentioned. “…and
Rey, for what it’s worth, Poe truly wanted this to end differently. He did everything he could from
his fighter to give Ben time to make it off that ship. He came here to apologize to you and thank Ben. He was going to give Ben his fighter so he could escape into the wilds before the Alliance forced him to face punishment for his crimes. Poe regretted what he did, he found an a—”

“I don’t care. Poe should be dead instead of Ben. If I see his face again, one or both of us will be dead.” Rey recognized the bitter contempt in her voice; she felt what it was like to be Kylo Ren. “I’ll put the hilt between us and force your fearless leader to choose whether it kills me, him, or both of us. We’ll see if he’s strong enough to make the same choice Ben did.” Rose nervously studied the lightsaber on Rey’s belt and startled as she glanced up at Rey’s eyes. Rey stared at her reflection in the durasteel bars attached to the bunk. Her eyes were empty pools of darkness. Devoid of humanity. Not evil, she realized...lifeless. It should have shaken her to the core. It had when she had seen it before, in different eyes, but she had changed—she understood now.

*The darkness kills the pain that is tearing me apart. The darkness is the only way I can survive this. I don't care if Ben wouldn't want me to fall. He's gone. Luke said I have to live for Ben, but he's wrong. I have to live without him. He would never have wanted to live without me. I am surviving the only way I can. I've been alone most of my life. I have been abandoned before, but the years of loneliness in the AT-AT were tolerable because I couldn't remember anything different. This shouldn't torment me like it does—I should be used to it—but I felt the happiness of being loved completely and devotedly and loving him in return. I will never forget him. Ever. It would be easy if I could. But I would never want to forget him. I miss him so much, I feel like the nothingness he left behind is slowly consuming every last part of me that was good. To be free of this pain, I would have to move on. I don't want to. I can't let him go.*

“Rey...” Rose warned, as if she could follow the dark path her thoughts had traveled.

“I can't live like this; I can't live without him. Will these thoughts ever go away? This pain?” Rey said distantly.

“No, Rey, the only way it would all go away is if you forgot him, and you'll never forget him. You'll never want to. The stronger your love for him, the deeper the wound he leaves behind. But the depth of your grief is a testament to the depth of your love, and that is worth cherishing. You had something, as brief as it may have been, that most people in the galaxy spend their entire lives searching for. I know that is little consolation when you miss him. Those thoughts can tear you apart. But over time, those thoughts lose their power. The pain never goes away, it just changes. You slowly spend fewer moments crying over what you lost by his absence and more moments smiling over what you had together. Missing him becomes less of a burden and more of an honor. He lives in you, Rey, and his legacy is the life you live in his memory. You can still say his name, tell the galaxy who he was, love him in his absence. Not even death can take away the memories only you shared. You don't move on, just forward. You don't live without him—as long as you are here to remember him, then he is not gone.”
There was something then that brought their eyes to meet. Even as Rey stared at her, Rose's eyes looked far away, as if she were remembering another lifetime. Rey didn't need to hear the words to know the wisdom Rose carried was the result of her own burdens. It meant little to her in that moment that she was not alone in her suffering, but it was something.

Then, in an instant, everything changed as her friend grasped her hand. There was a light in the darkness. It wasn't what Rose had said. Nothing Rose could have said would break through the dark thoughts that had blinded Rey from the truth. That is the nature of the beast; the darkness had convinced her that her thoughts were the only truth. It was black and white, with no room for grey. In the darkness, her broken, despondent, hopeless view was just reality. Everything else was foolish, Utopian thinking.

No, it was not what she said; it was the way Rose suddenly looked at her with such hope—for her. It seemed naïve at first. Rose couldn't possibly understand the darkness; she never had to struggle against its oppressive power. It was the way her eyes said, “I'll help you,” that ripped memories from the drowning depths of her grief. They were memories of a boy and girl in love, on opposite sides of a war, finding hope in each other. “You're not alone,” he had murmured in a stone hut, his tearful eyes filled with understanding and a deep longing. “Neither are you. It's not too late,” she had replied, her eyes filled with such hope—for him. She believed what he did not: that he could be saved from the darkness. In the end, he was.

Rey was on the opposite end of those pleading, hopeful eyes this time. She believed she was the lost cause, incapable of being saved, and her friend saw something more in her. Something she couldn't see. There it was, a spark of light, hope ignited. It was something Ben had never been able to destroy in himself, and neither could she. Rey remembered how Ben had fought to find his way out of the darkness, even when she was struggling with her own. It wasn't easy. It was painful; it dragged him deeper into his self-imposed torment; it seemed impossible...until it wasn't. His darkest moments he had to struggle through on his own, but he did it, and somewhere along the way it wasn’t just for her anymore.

She had fought for him through blood, sweat, and tears to bring him back from the darkness—a darkness he had struggled with his entire life—because she loved him. She knew if he were there with her, he would be fighting just as strongly for her, as strongly as he fought against Sidious so she wouldn't be taken. He gave his life so she wouldn't fall. Luke was right; she couldn't let him die in vain. It wouldn't be easy, but she had to live a life worthy of his sacrifice. His biggest hurdle had been learning to forgive himself, and if it hadn't been too late for him, then perhaps it was not too late for her, either. If he was worth it, then maybe, just maybe, so was she.

“I saw a box of Cassius Tree florets,” Rose said softly, attempting to break through to her friend. “In the galley. Do you want me to make you tea?” It was the type of tea Leia drank. She probably made it for Ben. The thought brought another wave of sorrow crashing against her fragile hope, but she allowed it to sweep away the comfort of darkness. The sea of emotions resurfaced again, drowning her in grief. Rose’s concerned eyes were her only tether to the physical world as she unraveled into the Force. The energy pulsed soothingly around her, caressing and embracing her.
It provided little comfort, though; the entire Force meant nothing to her when it was missing his energy.

“Yes, that would be nice,” she managed through sobs. Rey felt guilty for having tea when he couldn’t, but she hoped the warmth of it would give life to the nothingness that numbed her from the inside out. Rose’s eyes shifted behind Rey before nodding and leaving to the galley.

Rey heard the soft thud of boots behind her before strong arms were around her. She turned in the embrace to find Finn. Tears burned fresh trails down her cheeks as she took him in. His eyes were red and swollen, his cheeks stained with tears as well. *Oh, Finn. You didn’t hate him, did you? I’m so lucky to have you. You’re the closest thing I have ever had to family.*

Finn had lost friends and nearly been killed by the man she loved. He had tried his hardest to protect her—and the others he cared about—from that man, but he never abandoned her. Even at his most angry, he made certain she understood that he still stood by her. His love for her was stronger than his hatred for Kylo Ren. She knew that even as he built a life with Rose, he would always be there for her. It might not be the life Rey wanted; it might be missing something truly special, but she could find belonging with them. She would never be alone, not like before. It wasn’t a life of love with Ben, but it was still a life of love with family. She knew, one day, she could be content with that.

She almost smiled—almost—then she noticed the streak of blood smeared on the underside of Finn’s left arm. Her heart sank and bile rose to her throat. She could not pretend that he had been doing anything other than dragging Ben’s limp body somewhere onto the ship. He had clearly attempted to rid the morbid evidence of what he did for her by wearing clean clothes and removing as much blood as he could. If Rey walked back into the escape craft, she knew she would find the blood cleaned away there, too.

Finn wanted to make sure Rey didn't have to relive the events that took Ben away from her. It was a sweet sentiment, even though she could walk into that shuttle and point to the exact spot Ben had lay dying. In her mind's eye, she could see where every last drop of blood had marred its surface, but she would be forever thankful that Finn suffered through cleaning that for her. Those were not memories she would wish on anyone, especially her best friend, but seeing the physical reminder of the moment her dreams were shattered was too much for her to bear. Her life would be forever broken into two parts: before Ben died…and after. He was gone, just like her parents, nothing but a memory. While Rey grieved the missing memories of her family, she knew with him, she could never forget.

Finn noticed the way she was staring at his arms, regret twisting upon his face at the realization of what she had seen. He grabbed a canteen off the table and scrubbed at the stain until it was gone, remaining only in the images that would haunt her nightmares. He tenderly offered her the canteen, and the reason why shredded her insides like a laser cannon.
Rey stared down at herself for the first time since she had left the escape craft, and it was as if her senses suddenly returned. A crimson stickiness stained nearly every exposed centimeter of her hands and arms. She could feel the heavy tightness of it on her face, her hair matted and clinging to it. The entire front of her clothes were soaked in it. Her stomach rolled at the amount of blood—his blood—and she dry heaved as the metallic smell suddenly overwhelmed her. She wanted to crawl out of her skin. Her head fell to her hands and she cried out, the primal sound the only way she could express her despair.

Time must have skipped forward, or she must have temporarily lost consciousness, because her cry was broken by the shock of warm water on her face. Looking up, she realized she was in the shower—the shower in the Captain’s quarters with real water rather than sonic. If she hadn’t been overwhelmed with grief, she would have laughed at what was clearly Lando’s grandiose style. She was cradled in Finn’s arms, the water swiftly soaking through both of their clothes as he held her. He set her down, and Rey stared at the crimson-stained water swirling around her feet. She choked back a sob as her knees buckled underneath her. Supporting her weight, he whispered gently, “Close your eyes, Rey.”

She did.

Rey closed her eyes as he scrubbed at her face, her arms, her hands. She knew what she would see if she opened them. It was too painful to face the blood he was washing away, not because it reminded her of Ben’s death, but—in some morbid, twisted way—it was his, and it was the last physical reminder she had of him. Finn’s hands were gentle yet grounding, keeping her mind from flowing away to terrible images.

His fingers moved to the back of her head to undo her braid, but her hand shot up to stop him before a protest could form in her throat. “Please,” she said, eyes opening to meet his, “let me do it.” At some point, he had stepped outside of the shower, his drenched clothes soaking the refresher floor. With a nod of assurance, he dropped his hands. He couldn’t know what it meant to her, but he respected her wishes.

With a deep breath, Rey had to force herself to remove the tie. Her fingers trembled as they slid through the locks of hair, undoing what Ben had placed there. It wasn’t until the last strand fell out of the braid that the finality of it hit her. He’ll never braid my hair again. In the long list of "nevers" his death delivered, it was something as simple as his braiding her hair that seemed the most difficult to accept.

“I want Ben back!” she cried, collapsing to the floor as sobs overtook her again. Finn gently picked her up off the floor and climbed back under the spray with her. Her tears blended with the water sliding down his shirt as she rested her forehead against his shoulder. He worked quickly to soap
her hair and wash it the best he could. Rey didn’t mind that his fingers snagged in the tangles as he tried to navigate her longer locks; it kept her in that confined refresher with him, rather than lost to the "what ifs" that seeped into her mind like the plague. She felt him take the strip of material she grasped desperately in her fist. He tied it around her wrist, understanding its importance to her. His view of Ben may have changed, but his support for her had never wavered. She knew he was sincere when he told her he would always be there for her.

The water turned off, and she was led out of the shower. As Finn ran a towel over her to help her dry, Rey’s eyes fixated on the cabinets on the opposite wall. Her vision was jostled as he roughly scrubbed at her, but she could see the word clearly—three simple letters. It was written in black ink on the bottom corner, the Basic letters formed with a clumsy, unsteady hand. **Ben.** His name. It must have been written when he was young, the first letter was backward, yet Han had left it all those years. She wondered if Han had stared at it just as she was after he had lost his son. He could have covered it or removed it, but he had left it. It broke her heart and mended it all over again.

Finn must have seen what she was staring at, because he stepped into her line of sight. He took her by the hand and led her back through the corridors, both leaving a trail of water back to the bunk. Finn had sufficiently washed away the horrors that had stained her skin as if it had never happened. Her clothes were still wet from the shower; a steady drip of water on the floor ticked away moments of silence. She began to count how many hypnotic drips would pass before her thoughts wandered back to Ben.

**Thirteen.**

She followed the droplets landing by her feet, up her legs, to the blood-stained clothes that were soaking into the bunk. Her trembling fingers traced over the stains as she was pulled back under the sea of grief, drowning in waves of sorrow. The sobs returned, shuddering through her exhausted body. “I just want Ben back,” she repeated, as if saying it would be enough to bring him back. Finn wrapped an arm around her shoulder and let her fall against him.

“You know he loves you, right?” he whispered in her ear. He grabbed her hand and pushed two small cubes into it, closing her hand around them. “I found these in the shuttle. Wherever he is, he loves you with everything that he has. I will never forget the look in his eyes when he talked about you. He didn't fear death; his only concern was you. His last wish was for me to be here for you when he couldn’t, and I promise, Rey, I always will. Every time you want to talk about him, no matter how many times I've heard the story, I'll listen. Whether the memories make you angry or happy or sad, I'll be here for you. When it hurts too much to talk, I'll be here to remind you how much he loves you.”

“I don't deserve you,” she sobbed, and he squeezed her tighter. “You are the best family I could ever have asked for.”
“You know I love you too, right? You deserve so much more than life has given you, Rey. But fate brought us together, and I will always be thankful to call you my family,” he said softly as she sniffled into his side. “I’m going to go find you some fresh clothes, okay?” She nodded, and he gave her one last comforting squeeze before he walked down the corridor. She unclenched her fingers gripping the golden dice—once a talisman of hope, now the only tangible fragment of her love.

It was Poe’s voice that caught her attention. “Hey, buddy, how’re you holding up?” In an instant, her strong, brave, reassuring best friend was audibly sobbing. Rey didn’t think she could feel worse. She was wrong. How could she not see how much he was hurting, too? Seconds later, the miserable sounds were muffled. She hated Poe for what he had done, but she was grateful in that moment that he could be there for her friend. Finn was coming apart in his friend’s arms, and she felt guilty. She wasn’t accustomed to others taking care of her, and when those people were suffering, too, it made her entire body crawl with an overwhelming desire to hide—to find a small, dark place and cry alone until she could put on a brave face. Finn must have mumbled something in his sobs, because Poe replied, “No, no, let it out. I don’t blame you; that will stick with me for a while too.” Maybe needing someone at her weakest was part of having friends. It went against everything she’d learned on Jakku, but maybe it was okay for her to need them. They were there for each other; maybe they could be there for her too.

Finn’s breathing slowed, and he cleared his throat. When he spoke again, his voice wasn’t as muffled. “Thank you for your help, all of that. I don’t think I could have done that alone.”

“Yeah, that was…that was rough, and I don’t even like the guy,” Poe said, his voice heavier than she had ever heard it before.

“That’s one of the hardest things I’ve had to do in my life, and I never thought I’d feel that way about Ky– Ben, about Ben.” Finn scoffed at the irony. “I would have been happy about this two days ago, but it’s different when I got to know the guy. He was good for her, he loved her like she deserved to be loved. I can’t explain what happened on Ilum other than he saved Rey. On the Finalizer, I trusted a man who almost killed me. But he saved Rose. He gave me his weapon and left himself defenseless. I can’t stop feeling like I should have done more, I should have gone back for him, or picked them up instead. I wasted all that time when we could have… I should have done something.”

“You didn’t know, Finn; you couldn’t have known. None of us wanted it to end this way. He knew it was coming, though; he told me he wouldn’t make it.” Rey felt the anger surge again with Poe’s words. She didn’t know who to be angry with. Poe? Ben? Herself? Sidious? The Force?

Poe had set the entire event in motion, but he couldn’t stop Ben from making the decisions he
made. Ben had been so blinded by his desire to protect her that he had seen sacrificing his own life as the only way. As angry as she wanted to be at Ben, he had become the hero she’d hoped he would be. She knew she wouldn’t have been angry if it had ended the way she wanted. She was more to blame, after all. It was because of her he had made that choice. Would she ever be able to make peace with that?

No, it was Sidious’s fault. He had controlled her…and Ben. Sidious had forced him to choose between her life and his. Yet, even as she held him on the floor of that shuttle, she had believed he could be saved. She had trusted in the Force. It had seemed clear to her that it was their destiny to save the galaxy together. After everything he had done to change, why wouldn’t the Force spare his life? It wasn’t fair. Even without Sidious’s control or her darkness or Ben’s decision, or Poe’s plan, it would have ended the same way. The Force had fated it to be. Maybe Ben knew that when he told Poe he wouldn’t make it off that ship.

“I know, he told me that, too,” Finn said, breaking her from hopeless thoughts. “Who knows, he had the Force powers; maybe he knew. I know I had this bad feeling I couldn’t shake, but I never thought I’d see that when I opened the hatch. You know, for all the First Order did training me for war, they never trained me how to be okay with cleaning up the blood of the people war took from me.”

“You could have just closed the hatch and sent the shuttle off into space.” It was an awful thought that she hadn’t considered. What would they do with him? She wouldn’t allow them to just dump him in space, but they had to do something.

*Where is he now?*

“No, when Slip died, I just… left him there. I don’t know what they did with him. I don’t know whether they buried him or just left him for the…” Finn exhaled powerfully before continuing. “I promised myself I would never let it happen again. I promised myself I would die before I lost anyone else to the First Order. But I didn’t do enough, Poe. I was so worried about Rose and Rey that I never thought… and I left her to go through that alone. I never told him what he did… how much it meant to me. I thought I had more time, you know? This will haunt me for a while, but Rey deserves better than to send him off into space…so did he.”

“You could have let me do it on my own, like I offered,” Poe said. “Yeah, we have a history, but at least it wouldn’t have put us both through that hell.” They were words she hadn’t expected to hear. Poe had helped Finn care for Ben; he had offered to do it all alone. It was something that didn’t fit with her current perspective of her former general.

Finn’s voice was tight again when he spoke, and she hoped he wouldn’t break down again. She didn’t know if her heart could take it. “I had to do that for her. It’s just messed up, you know?”
“How is Rey? I don’t think she’ll let me anywhere near enough to ask—which, I get it, I deserve.”

“She’s…not good,” Finn said softly. “I wouldn’t be any better if it was me. It’s not fair, after everything she’s been through. I wish I had known how wrong I was before. Maybe she could have had him here with her then. Maybe if he was here, we could have done something different, something—”

“And we would have lost the war,” Poe said hopelessly. “You know that. We won the war, and she survived it. That’s all he wanted.”

Rey could hear the sorrow in her friend’s words as his voice wavered with emotion. “I know, I know. It’s just…she’s been alone her entire life, and she fought so hard for him…and for it to end like this…it’s not fair. She doesn’t deserve to be alone. From the second we left Jakku, all I wanted for her was to never have to live like that again. She’s not lonely in a desert, but she’s waiting for someone who’s never coming back.”

“I mean, I know it’s not the same, but what about Force ghosts?” Poe offered. “Luke told me stories…maybe he can come back.”

“I know she’s talked with Luke in some Force thing since his death. I know she and Ben had that bond, but I don’t know if they can do that? I don’t want to ask and make it worse. All I can do is just be here, you know?” Finn answered, and she loved him for it. In the happiest moments of her life and the darkest, he was always there for her. She wished she had the strength to be there for him.

“Do you think I should leave?” Poe asked. Finn didn’t answer, but his voice faded as he walked down the corridor. “Can I clean up first? I’ll leave BeeBee for now; he wants to stay to help the other droid.”

Rey sighed, wiping her eyes, as she glanced around at her new normal. Her thoughts began to wander to the stomach-churning images of Ben's broken body, but she shook them away and reminded herself to be strong—for him. She pictured his crooked smile instead, and the look in his eyes when she had lain wrapped in his arms, warm and safe. As quickly as it had come, however, the momentary reprieve was broken by another surge of grief. The desire to collapse on the cot and cry for days was becoming more and more appealing, and she feared the darkness would return.

Waves of memories crashed over her, dragging her deeper and deeper into their churning depths.
Unyielding memories of weighted stares, consequential touches, and fated words. Their love was new, their lives together had only just begun, but she wasn’t grieving what they had been as much as she was grieving what they could have been had fate been kinder. She had never believed it would end this way, because a cruel Force vision she had seen by a warm fire in a hut on Ahch-To had given her hope. She grieved what she knew they would have been…what they would have been, had the Force not destined her to a lifetime of loneliness. First, her parents had left her, then the only man she had fallen in love with. What was worse, her darkness had caused their deaths. She was the unwilling engineer of her own fate. The crippling ache returned.

“Where are you, Ben?” she asked the galaxy.

She hadn’t realized she had become numb to her surroundings until she heard Beebee-Ate’s encouraging beeps. Blue rolled forward, before quietly whirring. It only served to increase the pressure of tears building in her eyes. “No,” she answered, swallowing past the tightness in her throat. “He’s not.” The droid was insistent, repeating his assertion about his master. She shook her head. “He’s not here.” Blue repeated his vow, and the darkness surged with her grief. Rey turned to snap at him, “No, Blue, he’s dead!”

Blue rolled backward, but Beebee-Ate stopped him, urging him forward. Sparks and smoke puffed from his vents as he accessed an internal drive. As the holoprojector erupted to life in shuddering blue flashes, she realized it was his memory drives that he had accessed—his memory drives that she had nearly destroyed. To fix them, she would have to remove them. Once they were replaced, Blue would remember nothing…

Her thoughts were paralyzed when she heard the deep rumble of a heartbreakingly familiar voice. “Are you asking if I would do it again?” It was a voice she believed would be forever lost to her memories. The jagged pain of hearing it was unlike anything she’d ever felt, the pain of seeing life in a man whose last breath had been lost to the universe. But it was just as much a soothing balm that numbed an ache she believed untouchable.

In the holovideo, Ben’s eyes were soft and voice sincere. “Save you?” She remembered that moment; it was the night she had fixed Blue. She had awoken from a nightmare to find him watching her. She had thought she hated him when the darkness was clouding her thoughts. If only she had realized then that the nightmare was trying to warn her how it would end. I would save you every time. How hadn’t she noticed the way he looked at her? How had she not realized it then? Had he always looked at her like the physical embodiment of hope? She wished she had seen it then, if only to have had more time with him.

The projection shuttered, and another moment, captured in time, appeared. His eyes were tired and drooping as he stared up at her, but the awe in them made her heart stutter as it did then. “Beautiful,” he had said as if it were a fact. There was a mechanical grinding as the holoprojector froze on his face, but it didn’t matter to her, she could stare at his face for a lifetime. The image
changed, though there wasn’t much to see on the bed from the droid’s vantage point on the floor. She could see their intertwined forms in the darkness, and she remembered. She could still feel the warm huff of his breath in her hair. "I wish...I could hold you like this forever," he whispered. She shut her eyes and pressed her palm to her mouth to silence her sob.

I wish that too, Ben. I wish I could have stayed there with you forever.

The moment didn’t last, however. The drives hummed and moaned again, settling on another memory. Ben was sitting on his bed, and her head was leaning against his shoulder. She could feel the absence of him; she ached to feel his comforting warmth again. It took her a moment to realize it was the night he sat with her under the stars. “You should sleep,” he said softly. The Rey on the holoprojector curled further against him. She felt the same dread tightening in her stomach now. These memories would end just as they had before. “I don’t want to,” she said in the memory. “I want to stay here with you.” She wished she could stay there, pretending that he was still there, too. The stuttering blue projection was a cutting reminder that this was all she had left of him. She could watch the holorecording for the rest of her life, but it wouldn’t bring him back. “Remember the lake? Dream of the lake, and you’ll find me there.” He couldn’t have known then what those words would mean to her now, but she nodded through tears as if he had.

In the next memory, Rey was standing in front of Ben in a training room, her eyes closed with her hand extended at his temple. His eyes were closed, but his expression was soft. She could see the hint of a smile. It was painful to see his steady intake of breath and the slight tremble of his hair as it fell across his forehead. She remembered this moment. She wished she could feel the strong, warm energy of his Force signature again. She wished she could explore his mind as she had done then, learn everything there was to know about him. It was a memory she had thought about often. She had been in search of something—a thought about her that he had hidden well. She remembered the moment she found it. It had surprised her so much she had pulled away from his mind sharply, hurting them both. “Is that the truth?” she had asked him and he nodded. She remembered the deep pools in his eyes as he had studied her. Those simple but meaningful words would haunt her for the rest of her life: You feel more like home than home ever did.

There was a shrill whine and harsh grinding sound from the drives before the holorecording froze. Beebee-Ate warned Blue that continuing could cause irreparable damage, but he persisted, and she didn’t stop him. If she thought the last memory broke her heart, the one stuttering before her was tearing it out. They were standing across the room from each other, charts of star systems hovering between them. “You're in love with me?” He had said it with such incredulity, and Rey still didn’t understand how the man hadn’t seen it, or at least felt it, until that moment. “Yes, Ben! I'm in love with you.” Her giggle—so happy, so carefree, so unaware of what would befall them—brought a genuine, crooked, teeth-baring smile that lit up his entire face. It meant everything to her to see that smile again, but, Force, how it ached from the gaping hole where the bond used to be that she would never see it again. “You're in love with me.” It was a realization, a statement, a fact. “I am.” I’ll always love you. He looked down for a moment, and she remembered this part, even if the holorecording didn’t catch it. When he looked up again, his smile was young and easy, and the entire galaxy was reflected in his eyes. “Good. I'm in love with you, too.”
Her hand was still covering her mouth, her tears sliding over her fingers and falling away as the blue holoprojector replayed a moment she had never thought would be one of their last. The kiss was shorter than she had remembered. Why didn’t I keep him there with me and kiss him forever? She remembered how his smile faded after, her stomach dropping as the brightness in his eyes faded too. “What's wrong?” She should have known then, how it all would end, but she was too blinded by hope to see what he had been trying to tell her.

“What if...this doesn’t end the way you think? Would you hate me for confessing my love for you?” She wondered if that was why he had hidden it for so long—because he knew he was going to die, and he didn’t want to tell her something so meaningful if he knew he was going to leave her. “What do you mean?” she had asked, so innocent, so naïve to the fate that awaited them. He walked closer and chewed the words hesitantly. If I had seen it then, could I have saved you? “What if I don't make it through this?” he whispered, and her only response was to wrap her arms around his neck and tug him down to her. She remembered his warmth as he rested his forehead against hers. “Then I'll remember this moment for the rest as my life, because right now I have you, and right now you love me.”

The next recording was taken during an earlier connection when she still held anger in her heart for him. The droid had been distant from their interaction, peering from behind the wall in Ben’s quarters on the Finalizer. Ben was kneeling next to her, a small dark object in her hand. The Borgle bat. “I don’t regret trying to save him,” she had said. “I still believe he could have been saved if I had only helped him. But I just...gave up on him.” Her voice was barely more than a whisper, but Rey heard the words as if they had been written on her heart. “I let him die.” Rey didn’t know if she was strong enough to hear the rest. She muffled a sob behind her hand. “Maybe letting him die ended his suffering,” he had told her, when they both knew he wasn’t speaking of the bat. “Maybe it was the most compassionate thing you could have done for him.”

No, Ben! She wanted to scream him as much now as she had then. Letting him die ended his suffering, but not mine.

“He’s dead because I failed him,” she had said on that jungle floor. Could she have done more in that moment to make him see, even then, what losing him would do to her? If she had, would he have found another way to defeat Sidious? Would he still be alive? Was it just another way she failed him? As if responding to her across time, he said, “No, Rey, you didn’t fail him. You just believed you could save something that couldn’t be saved. He was never meant to survive.”

It was only through Blue’s recording that she saw Ben lift his hand to dry her tears. He thought better of it, but it reminded her of the Ben in the escape shuttle. “Don’t cry. Not over him. You can’t change what happened to him before you found him. You made his last moments warm, safe and...peaceful in a way he never would have otherwise experienced even if he had lived forever.”
More recordings flashed by at a high speed as Blue searched the drive for something. She could tell by his frustration that it was something important. The recording Blue found showed Ben fading in and out of focus as he knelt in front of the droid, the cockpit of the *Millennium Falcon* behind him. This was a recording she didn’t remember.

“Rey…” he said, before looking down at his hands clasped at his knees, blinking rapidly as he slowly exhaled. *When did he record this?* “I don’t know what will happen on that ship. I don’t know if I will make it to you, or if you’re still alive. I believe you are, and that’s enough. There are things I have to tell you, things that don’t seem right to do over a holorecording, so I won’t. If the Force wants you to hear them, then you will, when I find you. I think we both know the real reason for this message. If you’re watching this…” he paused to take a steadying breath, before finally raising his eyes from his hands.

“If you’re watching this, we won. It’s over, you’re free. But if you’re watching this, then I didn’t make it off that ship. I don’t know why, but I think I’m starting to understand what this will do to you. I need *you* to understand something; this isn’t like your parents, Rey. I didn’t want to leave you. I don’t know how it happens…my death…if it’s the poison or the First Order or the Resistance, but it doesn’t matter. *My* choices led me here, and my death was an inevitability. I only hope you weren’t there to see it, though, if the vision is true, then you will be. I let it win—the darkness. That’s why I have to fix this. I want you to know I accepted how this would end for me; I have to destroy the First Order, Sidious, and *Force Destiny*. If I am successful in doing that, then my only regret in my death is that it will hurt you. Even if I fail, you didn’t.

“Everything happened the way it was supposed to for the galaxy to be saved. I need you to know that, even in my darkest moments, you were always my hope. The second you looked at me as someone more than a monster, you became my reason to fight the darkness. I hope I can become yours. Because of the hope you had in me, I will die Ben Solo. I think…I think that’s something worth remembering. If the Jedi were right, I’ll always be there in the Force, just like Luke. If I’m not, don’t worry about me, I will be at peace as long as you don’t let the darkness win. That is my only hope, Rey. And you are the galaxy’s last hope to find balance, so you have to fight. For once in your life, you will finally have the chance to live.”

*Live*, his dying wish echoed in her mind, *for me.*

“You have the chance at a long, happy life with your family. You have the entire galaxy to explore. Do it all, Rey, I’ll be there. When it’s time, even if it’s a lifetime, the Force will bring us together again. Until then, it doesn’t matter where you came from, who your parents were, who you’re bonded to…you’re exactly who the Force designed you to be. You’re the hero the galaxy needed, you’re good: never forget that.”

The holorecording paused as his hand reached forward to turn off the projector. His lips were pulled into a remorseful smile, but his eyes were warm with love. She felt her lips pull into a half-
smile at the thought that he still chose not to say good-bye. Perhaps he truly believed they would see each other again. Without warning, the image disappeared as sparks spit through Blue’s side vents.

“Wait, Ben, don’t go!”

But he was gone. Silence fell over them, settling into the spaces in her soul that had shattered with his loss. He was gone, but the darkness had faded. Beebee-Ate nudged the black and silver droid, hurrying him away as he continued to spark. She wanted to tell him how much those recordings meant to her, how much hope it had given her when she couldn’t see through the darkness.

The only words she could find to say were, “Thank you, Blue.” He stared back at her as Beebee-Ate pushed him away, twittering an odd sound of confusion in response.
Chapter End Notes

Grief

Discussion of grief in relation to major character death
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
When the droids were gone, Rey collapsed under the weight of those memories, wiping her tears on the rough material of the cot underneath her cheek. She splayed her fingers in the fabric, desperately seeking a connection to the physical world around her before she drowned in her grief. As she stared at the lines etched in her fingers, she sucked in a deep breath and huffed it out again, almost as proof to herself that she hadn't died with him. She did it again and again, until all she was focusing on was her breathing. After several more breaths, she realized she had survived those moments without drowning in grief or slipping into darkness. A new hope radiated through the fog of despair, a means to gain control over the broken pieces of her life.

She decided to plan her next hour. Only sixty moments of breaths; it didn't feel as insurmountable as the rest of her life. It was a start—something possible. If she survived through those sixty minutes, then perhaps she could plan the hour after that. And the one after that. It was how she had survived before; she could do it again. The thousands of marks on her wall in the AT-AT were just as much a testament of what she had overcome, after all, as they were a countdown to a reunion.

She could plan each hour, until she made it through the first day. Then she could plan that day... and the next...and the next, until she made it through the first week...and then the first month... and then the first year...and the first decade. She would live each day the best she could, and it would be one day closer until she saw him again. Until one beautiful day, she would take her last breath, and they would be together. They would find each other in the Force—she had to believe that—but all those years and months and weeks and days started with the first hour.

She would wait for Finn to bring her new clothes, she decided. Next, she would get dressed, drink her tea with Rose, and go to the turret and look for a moon out the viewport. She would talk to Ben there, because she still had to say goodbye. That was where he was—out there; not what he left behind. Maybe he would be listening, and maybe he would see the moon, too, and she would feel just a little bit closer to him. After that, she would find one of the hundreds of things broken on that ship and fix it.

Then she would sleep, she decided. She would dream of that lake and find him there as he promised. For a few blessed hours, she could ease the ache in her heart, even if he wasn’t truly there. This was what Rose had meant by moving forward. There would never be a moment where she moved on, leaving the grief of his loss behind, but that was okay. She would take him with her wherever she went. There was something peaceful in the Force when she came to the realization, like praise, as it guided her through her first steps.
It won't be easy. I feel like I'm dying without you. But I'll fight the darkness Ben, I promise. Because I love you and I forgave you, and maybe one day I can learn to forgive myself, too. It's not much, but it is all I have to hold onto. I want to do what Luke told me to do—I want to live for you.

There was a chuckle in the Force. **Good for you, kid. He'd be proud of you.** Rey scanned the room, searching for a blue aura, but the familiar vibration in the Force had already dissipated. Rey smiled her first real smile since she had left the escape shuttle. She closed her eyes and allowed that peace in the Force to soothe the ache in her heart. Unlike with the darkness, the ache was still there, but the light had given her the strength to weather it. She imagined Ben’s arms around her, promising her with his touch that it would all be okay. A cool wind passed through the room, and, startled, her eyes fluttered open. A shiver trickled down her spine in the absence of the comforting arms she had imagined around her. She moved to the drawer to grab a blanket she had seen stashed there when Finn had cared for Rose after Crait.

Her eyes settled on the books she had hidden away there instead. **Luke’s texts.** In all of the events in the past few hours, she had completely forgotten about them. She trailed her fingers lightly over the decaying spines of the texts and sensed an energy caressing her senses. Mystical whispers, impossible to decipher at first, suddenly enveloped her in the Force as they had on Takodana. She was drawn to one of the texts. Her fingers brushed over the plain cover, and she jolted as an energy began to flow through her. Voices echoed in her mind.

*No! Come back!* she heard herself—only a small child—scream as the ship blasted away from Jakku. Then she heard Maz’s voice on Takodana, **Whomever you're waiting for on Jakku, they're never coming back, but there's someone who still could...with your help.** She heard herself scream the same words as before, but she was no longer a child. **Come back!** her voice echoed through the escape craft. Then she heard Ben's strained, yet comforting voice, his dying declaration. **I'll come back, sweetheart...I promise.**

The voices slowly faded away, and she looked down at her hand. Her fingers rested on a small, smoky-black book with no title. She pulled it out of the drawer and turned it over in her hand. Its appearance was unassuming; no words were written on the cover to hint at its contents. She opened it to the first page and read the title aloud.

“The Science of Creating Life.”

One last conversation echoed through her mind as she stared at the words. **Do you have the book "Science of Creating Life?"** his deep voice reverberated through her mind as much as it did her soul. **Why?** she had asked him. **I need it. It's important. How important?** she had wondered. **Life or death important.** The last words echoed around her until the energy faded away. Her heart jumped and her breath hitched as a cold realization settled over her.
This entire time I thought the Force had entrusted me the task to bring him back from the darkness, but that was never my destiny. It was his own. All this time the Force was trying to show me how to bring him back...to life.

She was moving before she had any idea of her destination, her feet carrying her as her mind caught up. Sprinting down the corridor, she shouted to Finn, "Get us to a cruiser with a medbay!" As she entered the room her feet—and perhaps the Force—had guided her to, the familiarity of it tore at her soul, sucking all the assurance out of her body.

Her feet had led her to him. He was fully covered by the light grey blanket. She walked slowly to the body, the blanket tucked neatly and respectfully around him. Finn’s jacket lay abandoned by his feet. She had seen this moment before, in her vision. Why didn’t I see? Why didn’t I listen?

The Force had tried to warn her—he had tried to warn her—but she had been so wholly consumed with the desire to turn him—something he had done on his own—that she didn’t see the cost in her denial. It had never been Finn under the blanket as she had once feared. It had been Ben the whole time. This has always been your fate. Steeling herself, she lifted the blanket away from his face. There lay the man who had given her everything he had—his heart—the only thing she had ever truly wanted from him.

"Ben...I...I found the book. I can save you. You can come back to me, like you promised," she whispered, lacking confidence behind her words. She opened the old book, which looked more like a journal of ramblings. He said he had read how to save her in a book. She knew this was the book; she just had to find the right page.

"Rey?" a trembling voice asked behind her. Rose.

"I can save him," Rey said, distractedly scanning the pages for the knowledge she was seeking.

Her friend exhaled a shaky breath. "Please don't hate me; I truly do care about him, too. So I need to say something that is going to hurt to say and hurt worse to hear, but here it goes: even if you can save him, have you considered whether you should?" Rey stopped reading and turned to her friend, lips parted, eyes wide in astonishment.

"No, not you Rose.” A tear cut down Rey’s cheek, matching the scar of the man who lay reposed
in front of her. “What happened to ‘winning this war by saving the ones you love?’ I love him! And I can save him! That is all that should be considered!”

"Rey, I sat next to him in that cavern. I watched what he suffered through to save you. You are the only thing in this entire galaxy that mattered to him. I know you love him, I know you want him back, but what did he want, Rey? This...this is dangerous. It nearly cost him his life trying to save you, and you were still alive. If you died trying to save him, it would make his death meaningless. And if you did save him but gave up your own life in the process, he would be devastated. He wouldn't want to live without you...." Rose replied gently, wiping her tears with the back of her hands.

No, I can't give up on him. Not again. Not when I can save him.

"...And I know this is hard to think about right now, but what kind of life would Ben have even if you saved him? You'll need a medbay, and the alliance won't save him. Even if they did, once he’s healed he will still have to pay for the crimes he committed as Kylo Ren. That's a death sentence, Rey. He knew this, he made his choice. He asked Finn to promise him to get you onto the Millennium Falcon without him, he injected that poison in his arm, he pushed the ignition switch on your lightsaber. He never intended to get off that destroyer. Ben knew how this would end for him, and he had accepted that fate.”

“I know what I'm asking seems impossible to consider, but before you make a decision, you need to believe that what you are doing is what he would want. To do that requires the deepest kind of love there is—selfless love. Because, as much as you want him with you, maybe saving the one you love is letting him go. It would be the hardest decision you'd ever have to make, but maybe it's better to let him die a hero...." After managing to say her piece through broken sobs, Rose embraced her. Rey shrugged her arms away, so Rose squeezed her hand in support, then reluctantly left her to her thoughts. A crushing pressure forced the air from Rey's lungs and she gasped for breath. She could still hear his deep but tender voice in her head.

“I made the decision in the caves to give up my life. I will not let you do the same for me. Don’t make me shut you out, Rey...it’s over...you're still not letting go...just let go...let me go...it's too late....please...”

She gently closed the book and collapsed down next to his body. The blanket shifted, revealing more that had been hidden underneath. They had changed his shirt; there was no doubt in her mind it was for her sake. They had anticipated that she would want to see him, to say goodbye, but cared enough to spare her from what he looked like in the aftermath. It was a plain white shirt—clearly not his, as it stretched too tightly across his chest. It was off-center and bunched up in places; she imagined it hadn’t been an easy task to accomplish, but she appreciated it more than she could ever express. He looked ethereal in white, the color contrasting vividly with his raven hair. She had never seen him in white before, and she knew she would never forget what he looked like in it.
Rey held back the tears until she saw the lightsaber reclipped to his belt where it belonged. It was a small gesture, but meaningful, nonetheless. Sobbing, she unclipped his lightsaber and trailed her fingers across the grooves as she had the night she contemplated killing him. He had lain in much the same position then, and she wished with everything in her that he would reach out and take it from her again. She wished she could go back to that night and just hold him instead. *One more night, that’s all I ask for.* She thought about what it would be like to say goodbye after having him back for those fleeting moments and wondered if Ben had been right about not taking that one bite of fruit. It already felt like it would have been easier not to love him, because now she knew what she was missing.

She rested the lightsaber reverently on the grey blanket, an agonizing reminder that the Force had given her the chance to change his fate.

*I don’t understand why.*

Why had the Force chosen to show her the visions it did? Why show her a future of happiness when they touched hands if it was never meant to be? Why show a body covered in a blanket; why not warn her with a vision of Sidious? Or Jacen on the elevated walkway? Or Ilum? Or their last kiss? She could have actually done something to change it. But then, maybe changing the future wasn’t the point of the visions at all. Maybe the culmination of their choices resulting in that moment was always and ever only going to be their destiny.

She studied his face, searching for the answers to questions of the universe. Finn or Poe had cleaned the blood from Ben’s skin and hair; his dark locks still dripped from their effort. His face reminded her of his regal, impassive appearance when he removed his mask on Starkiller. The Kylo she first met was more recognizable in the face of the man before her than the Ben she fell in love with. She had grown so accustomed to the dark circles, conflicted expressions, and emotional eyes that his features were nearly unrecognizable in their vacant state. His scar was barely visible against his colorless cheek. He was a nauseating pale grey that left no illusion of sleep, but he had never looked so peaceful.

“Are you finally at peace?” she whispered, her lips quivering and voice laden with tears. Her fingers sifted gingerly through his soft hair. “You fought your entire life for peace; were you only able to find it in death? Are you together again with Chewie, Luke, Jacen, Dev, Leia, and Han? Do they have their Ben back? Are you all happy in the Force, finally the family in death that you were denied in life? Was your only purpose to save the galaxy? Is this the end for the legendary Skywalkers? Is this what the Force wanted? Was this the destiny created for us all? Would it be selfish to bring you back to a life of pain and conflict when you finally have what you always wanted?”
His face remained passive in eternal rest. She wished he would answer her, rationalize in his misguided but logical way that was simultaneously frustrating and endearing. She wished he would tell her what he wanted, what he would have done if he were in her position. He made his decision, though, didn’t he? He made the choice to leave me forever. That should be it then. I should let him go. But if that is the truth, then why did he promise he would come back to me? What about our destiny?

"Do you believe in destiny, Ben?" she asked him quietly, "Because I feel that the Force set us on two paths to intertwine in this very moment. I just don't know why. Was I meant to save you? Like I truly believe I was? Or was I wrong? Was I meant to finally learn to let go?"

Not letting go was her greatest weakness, wasn’t it? Should she let him go? Should she "let it all die" as he had once told her? Was she only meant to help him save himself, which meant losing him in the end? As much as her friends would tell her she couldn’t save him from death, they were the same ones who told her he couldn’t be saved from the darkness. How could she reconcile following her heart with one but not the other? What if they were wrong? What if he was wrong? What if there was a way for them to be happy together? What if her destiny was to not let him go?

“What if the Force gave me the past that it did and bonded us together because I would be the only person in the entire galaxy who would not give up on you?"

I was meant to save him.

She opened the book and flipped through the pages. Her fingers trembled as she found the page that should contain the information she sought. It was missing. She could see the remnants of where the page had been torn from the book. Half of the sketch of a Loth-wolf in the margin was all that remained. Her stomach lurched. Ben, what did you do? He must have torn out the page when he was on the Millennium Falcon. She threw the book across the room.

“Why, Ben!?” she begged him through tears. “Why would you do this? Did you know this would happen? Why won’t you just let me save you!?” She felt the anger, betrayal, and frustration, resentment, fear, uncertainty, and agony. She could feel the powerlessness and grief all built inside her. She tried to breathe, to control the energy that was coalescing into the Force, but the power inside her was too great. As she searched for an outlet in the Force, every single imperfection in every object in the room appeared to her. It seemed as if each object was assembled from tiny pieces, the slimmest of cracks separating each piece. Before she could consider the implications of what she had seen, she screamed, releasing the final fetters on her emotions.

All at once, thousands of tiny concentrated beams of energy blasted from her body into every single tiny imperfection in every object in the room. The objects began to shatter, and Rey threw her hands out to protect herself in fear. There was a bright blue flash in the room, and then the
room fell eerily quiet. It was odd, because there was no sound from the raining debris of the shattered objects.

Raising her eyes tentatively, she expected to see the room around her in shambles. What she hadn’t expected was to find the objects in mid-shatter. It was as if she had stalled the entire galaxy. *What…happened?* As she stepped forward into the room, she passed a glass container that had fractured into thousands of pieces but still retained its shape. She pressed her finger into one of its sides, and the fragments exploded outward as if they were repelled. But they didn’t fall to the floor. The container looked as if it was paused mid-explosion. It defied gravity and physics…it defied all concepts of time. Had she done that—had she frozen time? She calmed her breathing as she realized her power. Ben’s words echoed in her mind.

*I wanted to teach you how to reach your full potential. You still don't realize it, even now. You have the capability to do unimaginable things.*

Ben had shown her she was powerful in the Force, but this was something else. She had felt different since Force Destiny, and she wondered if this was proof. Had the machine *given* her powers rather than taken them? If so, who had she taken them from?

Turning to the door to test whether the galaxy outside her room had been frozen in time, she found it replaced by a jagged, black…opening. It looked like a tear in fabric. She knew that it hadn’t been there before. Had *she* created it? Or accessed it? There was some sort of invisible matter blocking the portal, because it rippled as she stepped closer.

*Am I dreaming? Is this a vision? Another illusion?*

She turned back to her bondmate who still lay lifeless under the blanket. No, it was devastatingly real. She shifted back when something called her from the place beyond. As she stepped closer, a dark sky littered with stars reflected back at her. It piqued her curiosity. What was this place? More importantly, what did she have to lose?

Reaching her hand out, she touched the strange barrier, and it rippled again. It felt like…energy. She pushed her hand through the barrier farther, and it easily pushed through to the other side. Without another look back, Rey stepped through the opening.
Chapter End Notes

Grief

Discussion of grief
Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

--- CHAPTER 180 ---

There was a magnetism that pulled Rey through the opening, but her feet didn’t touch solid ground on the other side as she expected. She cried out, tumbling forward. It wasn’t until she felt the wind on her face and the fluttery feeling in her belly that she understood she was falling. She tried to
slow herself with the Force. Though she could feel its energy around her, she couldn’t manipulate the Force here. She was at the mercy of gravity. At once, she hit an invisible solid and rolled. Instead of rolling off the side, she rolled straight into another portal.

Rey hit the mud and realized it was raining. There was the familiar crackling buzz of lightsabers behind her, and she turned over. She knew immediately where she was. Kylo stepped forward, impaling a villager on his lightsaber. Rey had seen this place in a vision once on Takodana. She had seen it again in Ben’s memories. She knew it was strange, because the connection had spanned space and time, but why did the portal bring her here? Rey was paralyzed at the sight of her bondmate. Alive. As he stepped toward her, something yanked her backward, and she fell onto her back on an invisible skyway. The brief scene she had just experienced replayed repeatedly in the portal before her. When the scene replayed, Rey was a part of the memory.

“What is this place?”

If she could push through the portal to the past, if she could change it, could she change what happened to Ben? Rey pushed herself to a stand and immediately felt small. It looked as if she was in open space, standing on a transparent path of energy that led to infinite branches of other rolling paths. Connected to the paths were more portals like the one she had fallen through. These portals were more circular and uniform than the opening she had slipped through, but the concept seemed the same. They were doorways to moments in time.

Rey hesitantly took another step on the path and watched the energy ripple under her feet. It was as if she were standing on a visible representation of the Force. She followed the path in wonderment. As she walked, it felt as if she was surrounded by the strong energy of other Force users. Then she heard the disembodied whispers.

“Through the force, things you will see, other places, the future, the past, old friends long gone,” one whispered.

“You will find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view,” said another.

“Your focus determines your reality,” said a third voice, closer.

The voices surrounded her, words overlapping, until she stopped at another portal. Through the opening, she watched the devastating moment that had broken her heart. It was only a brief flash, but it was enough. The lightsaber clutched between them ignited, casting both of their faces in an indigo hue. The plasma blade passed through her bondmate – sealing their tragic fate – with
sickening ease.

Rey stumbled back from the viewport. What was this place? Why had the Force brought her here? To torment her? She glanced around at the other portals. All the moments in time portrayed by the portals were just flashes, but they weren’t all negative. They weren’t all her memories, either. They were, however, all consequential. They were all moments that had affected her future.

Her attention was drawn back to the portal in front of her. The brief flash played in tortuous repetition. She had seen it before, of course, through Sidious, who had seen it in the World Between Worlds.

*The World Between Worlds.*

Was that this place? Was this what Sidious had seen? If she stepped through this portal, could she change it? She didn’t change anything in the first portal she had fallen through. Rey had witnessed that scene in Ben’s memories, she had *always* been there. Unless, the reason she had always been there was that she had accidentally fallen through the portal to that time and place and permanently changed it.

Could she have changed the past, but only now realized *how* it was possible? If that was true, then what could she possibly change in this portal? Wouldn’t she remember a future Rey stepping through a portal to change what happened? If the future Rey *did* save him, then she wouldn’t be here. The implications were complicated and confusing. Rey backed away from the portal. If she did intervene, she would have to choose a different moment to intervene. One less consequential.

The next portal was a flash of Rey standing in Niima Outpost on Jakku, fueling a TIE fighter. She was Force-choking a man with a dead eye and a red tattoo on his face. Rey remembered the man, albeit a younger version of him. He had been one of the thugs who attacked her. But this moment had never happened. Was it an alternate universe? Was this what would have happened if she had stayed on Jakku?

Rey wandered further down the transparent energy walkway as the whispers continued around her. It sounded as if she were hearing moments in time. She had heard those same voices when she had touched lightsaber on Takodana. Had that been connected to this place, too?

In another portal, she saw a sandy-blond-haired man unstrap a little girl from a machine. She knew that machine, or at least one like it. *Force Destiny.* And she knew that little girl, too. It was *her.* The man pulled her through a portal and led her down a transparent skyway. It looked just like the place Rey was standing now. Before she could see where the man had taken the younger
version of herself, the scene replayed.

What was this place? Rey didn’t remember that ever happening. She didn’t remember anything from her life before the death of her parents, but wouldn’t she remember that? If it was real, he had saved her life from that machine. Who had put it there? Where had the man taken her? Who was he to her? She had so many questions.

Rey was distracted when she heard a man say behind her, “the World Between Worlds.” It was another portal, but it was a moment in time that didn’t involve her at all. It was Ben, her Ben. She could stand there and watch the minute emotions flicker across his face for the rest of her life. She had never seen him so beautiful, because he was alive. Ben was standing in a desert, but he had his scar and the same wounds he had sustained in the crash. Was it a dream? The scene replayed three times before she realized it contained the same man with the sandy-blond hair. He was explaining something about the World Between Worlds, and, finally, she forced her focus away from Ben to listen.

“My master wanted to use the World Between Worlds to travel back in time to stop his death and kill my son,” the man said. “He chose to be tempted by visions of the future first. When he traveled to the portals of the past, his plans were complicated when he found that the timeline was fixed. Well, the timeline was fixed for him. Once you see the future, there are no other possibilities. And nothing in the past can be changed to alter that future.”

There were portals of the future here? Rey had seen visions of the past and alternate realities, but nothing of the future. Unless…there were no alternate realities. Her heart stuttered as she realized what she had done. The flash of her choking the man on Jakku was the future, and, by viewing it, she had solidified it. She couldn’t save Ben. “Why am I here?!” she screamed into the nothingness around her. “Why does it matter if I can’t change anything?!”

As her chest heaved with agitation, her gaze wandered over the different portals. She had no interest in seeing the future. Not anymore. She knew what she wanted to see. In a path off to the right, she saw what she was looking for – a young, smiling Ben Solo.

Rey didn’t care what the man said, she would save him. She would drag him through the portal and back to the Falcon. He wouldn’t remember her, but he wouldn’t have suffered, either. He would be alive; that’s all that mattered. As she approached the portal, she realized it was a view of Ben and his friend Dev at the Jedi temple. Ben held a text in one hand as his other hand hovered over an injured creature between them.

Ben blinked slowly as if he had just awoken. “I feel…strange.”
“That can happen with Force healing,” Dev said. Though Ben was focused on the creature, Dev was focused on his friend. Dev blinked away tears. The young man’s eyes were distant, battling a profound conflict that seemed far more consequential than the fate of a creature. She hoped in his distraction, Dev wouldn’t notice her.

Steeling her courage, she stepped through the portal and grasped Ben’s arm. Dev looked up as she pulled her bondmate backward. He reached for Ben’s other arm as she jerked him through the portal. They fell onto the transparent skywalk, and Dev followed close behind. Her back hit the surface as Ben fell on his side next to her.

Ben’s eyes were wide and his breathing ragged as he scanned their surroundings. His gaze was focused on the world around them, but the entire galaxy could have been on fire, and she wouldn’t have noticed as she stared at the man she never thought she would see alive again. Her body shivered in memory of the desperation she had felt both mere moments and an eternity ago, when she begged hopelessly to see the smallest spark of life as he lay dead in her arms. She would have given anything then to see what she did now. Tears blurred her vision as she watched his chest rise and fall with ease. If he would go back with her, she would never take the breath in his lungs or the steady thrum of his heart for granted again. “Ben.” Reaching forward she grasped his hand, but he jerked it away. Ben jumped to his feet and ignited his blue lightsaber at his side.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “What is this place?”

“My name is Rey. Don’t be afraid,” she said, reaching for his hand again. He didn’t raise the weapon, but he did step away from her. Rey recognized the distrust in his eyes well. This time she didn’t deserve it, but it proved this wouldn’t be as simple as she thought. When she dragged him out of the portal, she hadn’t considered that he wouldn’t want to go with her. With the patience he had once shown her, she opened her palm in an offer. “Just come with me and I’ll explain everything, Ben.”

“No!”

“I know who you are; I’ve seen you in Ben’s dreams,” Dev stood from where he had fallen on the skyway and spoke for the first time since tumbling through the portal. “I’ve seen this place in dreams,” he added, glancing around them. “You’re from the future, aren’t you?”

Rey nodded through tears as she watched the realization brighten in his eyes. His focus switched to his friend. “And you’re here to bring Ben back with you.”

She nodded again as the first tears fell. “Yes, we don’t have much time, I need him to come with

“Don’t answer that,” Dev warned. “Rey, if you take him, then he’ll disappear from the temple. It will alter everything in your timeline, not just the one thing you wish you could. Changing the past to fix the future – it won’t go the way you think.”

“You don’t understand,” she cried. “It’s a matter of life and death.” Dev didn’t seem surprised. In fact, what she said seemed to confirm his suspicions. He stepped forward and reached for her. His hand hovered over her arm as his eyes found hers in a silent question. Rey didn’t know what he wanted, but Ben trusted him, so she trusted him as well.

Dev rested his hand on her skin and closed his eyes. She felt a feather-light touch of warmth on her memories. Images flashed so quickly before her eyes that she couldn’t discern what they were. An energy passed between them, and then she was confronted with images she didn’t remember but knew she had seen before. There was a conversation next to her dying bondmate in the snow. Dev had told her of their future. Why didn’t she remember it until now?

Only a few seconds had passed, but she felt as exhausted as if she had re-experienced every moment of her life in that time. When Dev opened his eyes, they were knowing.

In an instant, he had seen everything. But so had she.

He watched her for a minute before releasing a deep breath. “You won the war?”

Rey nodded, but her eyes refocused on Ben. She wanted nothing more than to run to him and hold him and kiss him and listen to his heartbeat. She couldn’t, because this wasn’t her Ben. Her Ben was dead. That reminder ignited the fire under her skin, and she turned back to Dev. “You told me it was our only chance to win, but you never told me what I would lose!”

There was only sorrow in the young man’s eyes. “You know why I couldn’t.”

“Then he’s coming with me,” she all but growled. Rey knew she wasn’t angry at this man. She had pulled them through a portal into a strange world and was demanding to take his best friend. But didn’t he understand? She had no other choice. She couldn’t take the Ben from her time without
losing the war, but she could take this Ben.

When Dev spoke again, it was as if he had heard her thoughts. “If you take him, you’ll undo everything,” he reminded her softly. “His sacrifice will be for nothing.”

“I don’t care! I can’t let him –”

“Do I get a say in this?” Ben asked, voice low in contempt. Rey turned to her decade-younger bondmate as his friend did. “Do I get a say in anything, or is my whole life planned out for me?”

No, she wasn’t like his parents or Luke or Sidious. She didn’t want him to become someone he wasn’t. She wanted to save him. “Come with me and I’ll explain –”

“Rey is the girl from your dreams,” Dev interjected. Ben turned to her, his eyes full of wonder as they had been on Starkiller after she had called the Skywalker lightsaber. “You are bonded; you will fall in love with her.” Ben stepped closer, nervously, eyes enraptured by hers. She could see the desire to go with her by the twitch in his fingers. Dev was helping her. Or at least it had seemed that way until he continued. “But you will be on opposite sides of the war.” Ben paused, turning to face his friend. “You will turn to the dark side, Ben, because you will discover your family lied to you, Luke will draw his lightsaber on you, and that voice in your head will convince you that you have no other choice but to join him.”

Ben backed away from Dev as if his words were a cruel joke. “No.”

“You will kill Cade and Clighal and Dal and Tionne, and…” Dev’s voice broke as he continued. “And Alema.”

“No.” Ben shook his head, face twisted in disgust and disbelief.

Dev persisted. “You’ll give Snoke the plans to a weapon that will destroy an entire star system.”

“No,” Ben repeated, his voice cracking, but Rey heard the uncertainty there.

“You will kill your father.”
“No!” Ben’s pained eyes bounced from Dev’s stare to hers. She knew he would find the truth there. “No!” His cries echoed through the darkness.

“But Rey will help you see the light,” Dev continued before his friend could further spiral. “She will help you see who you truly are. You will kill Snoke, turn back to the light, and fight to save the galaxy from the new empire you helped create. You will stop Darth Sidious and his army of Sith from rising again. But it will come at a price. To save her – and the galaxy – you will sacrifice yourself. Now she is here, because she wants to bring you back to her time. But if she does bring you back with her, it will alter the future, and everything you have fought for will be destroyed. The galaxy will in all probability fall, and she will lose the chance at a life of happiness you believe she deserves.”

Rey knew Dev was right about one thing. If Ben went with her, he would disappear from the Jedi academy. Luke would never think about killing him, Ben would never fall, the Jedi knights would still be alive, and there would be no map to Skywalker. Without Beebee-Ate, Rey would have never left Jakku. Even if they found each other, this Ben still had Sidious’s voice in his head; he hadn’t become the Ben that her Ben was. He wouldn’t understand her like her Ben did. But she had hope that one day he would. More importantly, she had hope that Ben wouldn’t care about the future they could lose because he hadn’t lived it. He couldn’t understand the consequences of altering the past – consequences she refused to contemplate. She didn’t care about anything but saving him.

This time, however, when Ben turned to her, his voice was full of resolution. “No,” he said, breaking her heart again. “I won’t go with you. I’m not the man who would do those terrible things. But even if that is my destiny, if you care enough to come back for me, then I know I care enough about you to give you the future you deserve.”

“I deserve a future with you in it!” she cried. “You don’t have to do this! You don’t have to die!”

Ben stepped toward her, and she felt hope bloom in her foolish heart. When he spoke again, it was with a deep, rumbling murmur. “As a Jedi, I have sworn to defend the greater good with my life. If I give my life to prevent the return of the man my grandfather and uncle fought to defeat and it saves you in return, then that is a better death than I could have hoped for. It’s everything I ever wanted to become.”

“No, it isn’t.” Rey shook her head with a sob. “The Jedi failed you. This is not what you wanted to be!” She pleaded with him to see the truth, but his eyes never wavered from his resolution. She refused to go back without him, not after seeing him alive again. “I can’t leave you,” she whispered as he moved closer. “I love you, Ben.” It was cruel. She knew from his memories what it would do to him to hear those words after the whispers in his head had convinced him he was unlovable his
Ben stepped closer, deep emotions swelling in his eyes, but no words escaped his quivering lips. She waited for a response and was rewarded with a soft smile that reached his eyes. Her heart radiated with a profound happiness to see that smile again. She knew he would likely pull away, but Rey moved forward and wrapped her arms around him as tightly as she could. The thud of his heart, the smell of his clothes, and the vibration of his energy was comfortingly familiar. His arms tensed when they hesitantly wrapped around her, and she had to remind herself that this Ben had never touched her before. But before long, he settled into her embrace and pressed his face to her hair.

“You love me?” he whispered with a boyish hope that beamed in her heart. She nodded against him, basking in his warmth as she held him tighter. It wasn’t until she felt the wet warmth of his tears in her hair that she even realized he was crying. When she pulled away, the lightness in her heart fell away as she saw the unmistakable gleam of goodbye in his eyes. “Then you need to let me go.”

The sharp ache of grief returned as his words from the Finalizer replayed in her mind. *If you love me, then you need to leave me here, Rey.* She hadn’t left him on that ship, and she wouldn’t leave him here. Ben stepped away from her, his glistening eyes abandoning her pleading stare to meet his friend’s remorseful ones. “We need to go back,” he begged Dev softly through tears.

“Wait, Ben!” she pleaded. She had come this far; she couldn’t give up now. “I need to tell you what happens in the future!”

Dev stepped between them. “Rey.”

Rey focused around him on her bondmate. “One day they’ll tell you about a machine called the Force Destiny—”

“Don’t do this, Rey,” Dev warned.

“Destroy that machine—”

“This won’t help him,” he continued, but she refused to listen.
“And if the fight still ends up in a Carbonite room with Sidious—”

Dev moved into her line of sight. “There has to be another way.”

“He’ll try to control you through your darkness—”

“Rey!”

“No, Dev! He needs to know,” she cried as she pushed past him to her bondmate. “Whatever you do, don’t turn the lightsaber against yourself to—”

“Don’t put that burden on him!” Dev shouted. The young man had been patient to a fault in Ben’s memories, so it was enough to draw her attention back to him.

“He needs to know!”

Dev shook his head. “No one should know their future!”

“Then why did the Force send me here?” Her words were heavy, laced with the pain of losing the man she loved, and it was enough to blanket them all in silence. The sympathy in their eyes only added to her torment. She didn’t want pity, she wanted him.

“To show me,” Dev murmured. The devastation of his words was written plainly on his face. “You were sent here to show me.”

She had expected sympathy, further arguments, irritating logic, but she hadn’t expected that. “What? No, I…why would it matter if I show you?”

“Rey, I see threads of future timelines, but they’re incomplete and vague,” he said, voice waverering with emotion. “What started all of this – what I will one day tell you I saw – I couldn’t have seen… without help.” He stopped, swallowing thickly as his eyes held hers with consequence. “Rey, the reason you’re bonded, the reason you and Ben were brought together in your darkest hours by that lightsaber, the reason I knew in the snow what would happen, the reason you’re standing here… is you. Everything that will happen, every choice I make in hope of guaranteeing that future, is
because of the vision I’ve seen just now through you. You may have already won the war, but these are your first steps in ensuring that it was won.”

The consequences were too significant for her to contemplate. To believe that all of Dev and Anakin’s manipulations had been in response to what she had set in motion was absurd. She had never done anything as important as Dev implied. “If you’re telling me the truth, if I was the one who showed you the future, then how do you know this was the only chance? There could have been thousands of possibilities where we won.”

“Because the Force brought you here to ensure it,” he said simply. “One day, as the destiny of the galaxy draws near, I’ll be able to see the threads better. But I feel the truth of it in the Force. Reach out, feel it; you know it’s true. Just like you know we’ve been here too long already.”

Then everything I do here doesn’t matter, because I was always meant to do it.

Even with that sobering realization, she didn’t feel trapped or panicked. Just as she had felt in the caves, watching her identical reflections snap their fingers before she herself had made that choice, Rey knew the Force was leading her somewhere. Unfortunately, it wasn’t in the direction she had expected. She was ensuring the present by changing the past. This place was not meant to change the fate of Ben Solo. It was intended to ensure his death. Everything she had believed was solely the Force’s will had been set in motion by her. Rey should have known that there was more than she understood, because the Force did not act alone, it guided others to its will.

Dev looked to his friend, who had been silently watching their exchange. Ben answered his unspoken question with a nod. His warm, bright eyes found hers again.

“This isn’t goodbye,” Ben assured her, stepping further away from her toward the portal.

“Not for you,” she whispered.

“Not for you either, Rey,” Dev said as he tested the energy of the portal with his hand. “Love is the strongest energy there is, and energy can’t be destroyed. Death doesn’t silence love, it only delays it. You will see him again.”

Rey followed them to the edge of the portal. “At least you’ll remember this,” she said, more in consolation to herself than to them. The look in his eyes, however, reminded her that her desire to change the past was selfish. As she witnessed the torment her words had forced him to endure, she
knew that Dev was right; it would only burden him.

“I don’t want to remember,” Ben whispered, turning to Dev. “I don’t want to know how this ends. What if we ask master Luke? He can help me forget.”

“Let’s get back and we’ll see what we can—”

“I know how to forget,” she said, fighting back tears as she grasped Ben’s arm to keep him with her for a moment longer. It would break her heart further, but she knew what she had to do. For him. “I forgot you once, Ben; that’s why the dreams stopped. If you will it, through Force persuasion, you can forget anything. You can forget you ever met me. But I will remember you, one day. Maybe one day you’ll remember me, too.” Dev nodded once in gratitude and pushed through the portal, dragging Ben behind him.

With a broken smile, Ben stepped through the portal. Her hand slid down his arm until her fingers caught on the tip of his fingers. They both held on for a moment as his eyes roamed over her face, memorizing it. When she released him, it was like losing him all over again.

Rey turned to step away when her foot kicked an object on the transparent skyway. She recognized it immediately. The Science of Creating Life. Ben must have brought it with him from the Jedi temple. If he tore out the page on Ilum, then it would still be intact at the Jedi temple. If she could just look at it….

Rey ignited her lightsaber and used the light to read the pages as she flipped through them quickly. When she found the page she needed, she accidentally tore it in her agitation. The sketch of the Loth-wolf in the corner was bisected directly down the center by the tear, just as it had been on the missing page. In a daze, she put pressure on the page and watched as it separated from the text along the tear. Rey stared at the unique jagged shape of the edges on the page. It looked exactly as it had after Ben had torn it.

Then she was struck with a terrifying thought.

Maybe it wasn’t Ben who had torn it out after all.

With the light of the plasma illuminating her face, her eyes wide in sorrowful understanding, Rey lifted her stare to her young bondmate. Through the portal, he was staring up at her. He had waited for her to look at him one last time, then he closed his eyes, and she knew he was using the Force
against his own mind. It gave her comfort that her face was the last image he wanted to see before he willed himself to forget everything she had told him. She wondered if he would see her face, bathed in the light of her weapon, in his dreams. Part of her had remembered him, perhaps part of him would remember her.

*It is you,* he had said when she called his grandfather’s lightsaber on Starkiller. She had to believe that part of him remembered what she had given up in a world beyond space and time.

With nothing left to keep her there, she knelt and slid her hand into the portal. The energy around her vibrated as she placed the text by Ben’s feet. Then she pulled her hand away from the energy and lifted the paper she clutched tightly in her other hand.

Rey read both sides of the page in the hope there was some magical word or simple manipulation in the Force that could help her save him. There wasn’t. The page spoke of meditating in the deepest levels of the Force, of altering midi-chlorians, and using other dark Force users for strength, but it contained instructions for saving oneself from death, not others. The Sith were selfish. Her journey to the World Between Worlds was for nothing.

She cried out in frustration and pushed herself to her feet. Wiping her tears with the back of her hand, she was intent on leaving that place for good.

“Sorry, I was distracted,” Ben laughed through the portal. Her eyes were drawn to him as his hand returned to hover over the creature, and he lifted the text in his other hand. Ben opened his eyes and smiled. The smile was young and carefree. It was clear he had forgotten her and the knowledge that tormented him.

“Focus on the light,” Dev instructed and Ben shut his eyes again. The position of his hands, the hunch in his shoulders, the conflict in Dev’s eyes – it all looked eerily familiar.

It wasn’t until Ben opened his eyes again that she realized why she felt like she had seen it before. He blinked slowly as if he had just awoken. “I feel… strange,” he said.

Rey mouthed Dev’s next words as he said them. “That can happen with Force healing.” She knew why Dev blinked away tears now. It had nothing to do with the creature they were healing. He was grappling with the knowledge of the future he had been burdened with. She had changed nothing. Everything she did, she had already done and always would do. Every change she made had resulted in the very future she had tried to alter.
“Why isn’t this working?” Ben said to his friend as he tried to heal the creature, “why can’t I save him?”

His words drew her attention back to the portal. ‘This isn’t a scratch, Ben; he’s mortally wounded. You can’t just use your light, you have to use your lifeforce. You have to give part of your soul to save him.”

“What about the other one?” Ben asked, nodding to a creature lying lifeless off to the side. “Can we bring that one back? I have the text….”

Dev shook his head. “No matter what your book says, Ben, to save a life would require a life. And even if it’s possible, unless you have part of its soul inside you from blood, bond, or healing, you will restore it in body only. It would require a power beyond all of us.” His eyes flickered up to hers, and she wondered if he could still see her through the portal.

_Blood, bond, or healing._

They weren’t family, not by blood. They weren’t bonded, not anymore. But he _had_ healed her. If what Dev said was true, he had left a piece of his soul inside her. Whether Dev was speaking to her or not, he had given her hope.

With resolve, Rey turned and stormed back toward the entrance portal. Some paths ascended higher above her; she hoped perhaps one of them would lead her back. As she climbed the path she watched short flashbacks from her life and other lives through the portals: Luke at the burning temple, Kylo moving from behind a tree on Starkiller, her family flying away into the Jakku sky.

One showed a moment between Leia and the projection of Luke. “No one’s ever really gone,” he said.

Another portal showed her standing before Snoke, “You underestimate Skywalker and Ben Solo and me.”

Rey pushed harder up the transparent walkways, the paper trembling in her hand. On her left, another portal drew her attention. It showed Luke again, but this time he was speaking to a small, green, wrinkly creature with pointy ears. “Difficult to see; always in motion is the future.”
At the sound of the creature’s voice – his familiar voice, she’d heard it before – there were disembodied voices that whispered from the space around her. The voices – some male, some female, some new, some she knew well – echoed around her. Their words were clear and purposeful.

“The Force is strong with this one...Do or do not, there is no try...Be mindful of your feelings...I’ll keep us pointed in the right direction...Somehow, I’ve always known...Remember, concentrate on the moment. Feel, don’t think. Use your instincts...I am one with the Force and the Force is with me...The biggest problem in this universe is no one helps each other...I promise you...No, I promise you... Hope is like the sun...The time to fight is now...If you only believe in it when you see it...I’ll not leave you here. I’ve got to save you...You’ll never make it through the night...Never tell me the odds...Bring him home...Remember the Force will be with you, always...”

She didn’t fear them. She felt like she had known them all her life, like familiar whispers in a dream. They made her feel peaceful…supported...loved. It gave her hope as she climbed over the apex of the path and her eyes were drawn to another portal.

It was Dev. He was kneeling in the snow, and she knew that her bondmate lay next to him. This was the memory she experienced when Dev had touched her arm. That wasn’t what frightened her and brought her standing before the portal. What frightened her was Dev staring directly into her eyes as if he could see her. She stopped and returned his stare.

A conversation replayed unbidden in her mind.

Where are we? she asked.

Somewhere in between, I guess.

As Rey moved closer, his eyes followed her. “Can you hear me?” she asked. He nodded, and then his stare fell back to watch over the man they loved. “Can I save him?”

He didn’t answer.

There was a woman Rey couldn’t see through the portal, but she heard her voice. It was her. There was no doubt in her mind that she had experienced that place before, because she knew the words she would say next. “How will I know what the right choice is?”
“Never lose hope, Rey,” he said, his voice was heavy with consequence. “Whatever you do, never lose your hope. What you will face – it will require hope beyond this world, and a little bit of luck.”

Rey?

The voice stole her breath with its familiarity, she swore she would recognize that deep rumble anywhere, but she didn’t have time to ponder its significance. There was a loud cracking sound to her right, and she found the tear she had created as an entrance into the world. It was glowing. She glanced back at Dev, and his stare flickered from a place somewhere over her right shoulder back to hers. His eyes were bright with urgency. “Rey, he says it’s time to go.”

She didn’t know who "he" was, but she felt the insistence to run from the Force inside her. Without as much as a goodbye, let alone answers to the thousands of questions burning in her mind, she sprinted for the glowing passage. She realized the glowing light was mending the opening, closing it. The pathway ended before it reached the passage, but she jumped for the barrier and hit the floor of the Millennium Falcon on the other side. As she turned back, the tear in space and time mended itself completely as if it had never been there at all.

Once it had disappeared, sound returned with the simultaneous shattering of every object in the room. The room was in shambles. Rey glanced down at her hand. Her fist gripped tightly around nothing. Though she had made it through the portal, the paper detailing how to save Ben had not. It didn’t matter anymore. Though she hadn’t brought back what she had gone into the portals for, she returned with something greater. Hope. She would save him, or she would die trying. She hadn’t given up on Ben Solo before; she wouldn’t start now.

“I know what I have to do.”
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She realized it then. If she could create a portal into the World Between Worlds with one thought, then she had it in herself, somewhere, to save him. She knew it as if it were a certainty. She could do it if she trusted in the Force as he had taught her. He had said her limitations were only mental. It was time to put that theory to the test. She didn’t need a book... the energy in the Force, the light, would guide her as it always had.

Rey was different. She was no longer the scared little girl on Jakku. She knew denial didn’t change the truth. She knew waiting didn’t bring people back. She had lost her hope in believing circumstances would change, and gained hope in herself that she could change them. Rey was no longer the girl who would wait for Ben Solo to come back to her.

*I will bring you back to me, Ben.*

Brushing his hair back, she gently placed her hands on either side of his temples and closed her
eyes. She searched the Force, but could not find his energy or a life source to connect to. *Meditation.* She remembered that part. The book called for the deepest levels of meditation. Closing her eyes, she remembered his calming voice.

*Breathe.*

*I can do this. I can do this.*

*Breathe.*

Rey pushed deeper into the energy around her, releasing her thoughts, her fear, and desires, her will, *everything,* to the guidance of the Force. She felt lighter, more peaceful than she had before, but she persisted deeper. There was a call that she was chasing – a soft murmur of thousands of voices – and it was growing louder. She was close. With everything in her soul, she knew she was close. As she pushed deeper, her body grew heavy as if she were falling asleep. Rey resisted. The words from the voices started to become clear.

“Let go,” they told her.

Rey allowed the heavy feeling to crash over her, and distantly felt herself falling. Rey felt a jolt and opened her eyes. The room on the *Millennium Falcon* was gone. Rey feared breaking her focus, but judging by the grass beneath her knees and the soft lapping of water nearby, she was certain they were by the lake in her dreams. Did that mean it was working? Or had she fallen asleep? Ben was there with her, it had to mean *something.*

Rey had healed Ben once with her light. She could do it again. Placing her hands by his temples once more, she breathed deeply, allowed the light – her powerful love for him – to flow out into the Force. Every thought, every emotion that came from her love for him willed the energy from her fingertips to flow into his limp body.

*Love.*

Rey thought of all the little things she loved about Ben, sending that love to him through the Force.
She loved the way he hid the entire galaxy behind his eyes. She loved how they ignited and
smoldered when he looked at her. When he had found her in his dreams, he said she had starlight in
her eyes, but maybe they were just reflecting the celestial inferno in his. She missed the way he
pinned her with his fierce stare. She loved how every intense emotion flickered through those eyes.
She loved how he experienced every emotion deeply and wholeheartedly. His entire face was a
mirror of his heart, and truth hid behind every expression.

She loved how he was both gentle and patient, yet protective and fierce. She loved the way he
touched her tenderly, as if he were afraid to hurt her, but trusted her completely to hold her own in
combat. She loved his confidence in her when he taught her and his encouragement of her
strengths. She loved the way he made her feel like the only woman in the galaxy.

She even loved the way the smile pulled on the corner of his lips when he was trying to be
perverse and derisive. It aggravated her beyond words at times, but she deeply missed his sarcasm.
She loved the way he deflected or counter-questioned when he argued; battling him intellectually
and physically was always a challenge. She even missed his brooding silence and the foolish words
that would come out of his mouth sometimes.

What she truly missed was how tightly he held her. She felt belonging, comfort, safety, and
understanding in his arms. She loved the way he said her name. She loved that he assured her of
his love for her with everything in him. She loved his honesty... his loyalty... his irritating logic...
his commitment to promises... his passion, even if it was misguided... his brilliant light... and his
overwhelming darkness. She loved it all, and she wanted it back.

But it wasn’t enough, she could feel it. *You can’t just use your light, you have to use your
lifeforce*, Dev had said in the portal. *You have to give it part of your soul to save him.* Her soul
felt as if it had broken into a thousand pieces when he left, she couldn’t remain whole when too
many pieces were etched with memories of him. If the soul was comprised of knowledge and
emotions earned from experiences, then she would remember everything they had felt for each
other, and every moment they had spent together. She would give him the last piece of her soul if it
saved him.

She remembered the fear when she first met him on Takodana...the shameful intrigue when she
first saw his face on Starkiller... the betrayal when he killed his father...the fascination and
knowing in his eyes when she summoned Luke's lightsaber...the courage and exhilaration she felt
during their fight.

She remembered the terror she felt the first time their eyes met over their Force Bond...the regretful
moment she realized how much her words could hurt him...the desire and understanding the first
time he stood before her as a broken man rather than a monster...the tender and compassionate
energy between them when their hands first touched...the softness in his conflicted voice when he
whispered to her in the elevator...the awakened and liberated look in his eyes after he killed
Sidious...and the betrayed look in his eyes when she reached for the lightsaber instead of his hand.

She remembered the broken and lost expression that matched her own heart when she left him on his knees on Crait...the agony when he threatened to destroy her...the guilt she felt when she learned how much she hurt him with her words...the relief when they could not destroy the bond...the yearning and desire she felt on Kamino...the disappointment in her heart after Concordia...the betrayal on his face after she kissed Poe...the relief she felt after she thought he had died...and the warmth of the light that healed her hand.

She remembered the silent devotion they shared in the bond before their vision...the betrayal she felt when she thought he had sent the recon ship...and the pain in his voice when she wouldn't trust him...the fear in his voice when he tried to save her from Poe...the devastation they both felt when he ended the bond...and the lonely and resigned look in his eyes when she pulled the lightsaber on him.

She remembered the understanding she found in the agonizing memories that she witnessed in his mind...his denial when she told him she loved him...the conflict in his eyes when he battled her and the darkness on Mustafar...the comfort and belonging she felt in his arms...the hope in his eyes when they shared the dream by the lake...the warmth she felt in him when he braided her hair...and the patient and perceptive way he taught her about the Force.

She remembered his understanding when he helped her through the darkness...his pained expression when she discovered the truth about her parents...the fear in his eyes when he begged her to tell him her location...the change in him she felt when he defected in his fighter...the terror in his voice when the avalanche fell upon her...the joy in his eyes when he got to see her again...and the fire in his eyes when Jacen had touched her.

She remembered the relief as he held her when he found her on the Finalizer...and the love in his eyes before he kissed her...the trust and invincibility she had felt when they fought back to back...the resolve in his eyes when he refused to let her go with Sidious...the hope when he kissed her...the devastation she felt when she discovered what he had done...the love and regret in his eyes when he said goodbye...and her final understanding and acceptance as he whispered his last promise...she remembered it all, the good and the bad, and gave all of that part of herself to him.

A strange energy emanated from the crystals in her pack as her light grew stronger. There was heat radiating from them, she could feel it through her pack. Something was guiding her to them. As if not completely by her own will, she reached into her pack and pulled out the crystals. They focus energy from the Force, she remembered. They were used for weapons that took life...and bestowed it; maybe they could help her too. She placed them under her fingers, and continued willing the energy from inside her into him. With every thought, every emotion, every memory that she released into the Force, the energy of the crystals grew stronger. The heat burned underneath her fingers, but she wouldn’t let go.
As the energy in the crystals grew stronger, so did the energy around her.

Rey felt another presence in that place with her. Ben? When she glanced up from her bondmate’s face, she found Leia – bathed in an ethereal blue hue – kneeling across from her on the other side of Ben. Rey gasped a shuddering sob of hope as Leia smiled at her, and turned to gaze down at her son. Leia placed her hands over Ben, and Rey felt the power in her hands swell.

Then she felt another presence. With a hand on his sister’s shoulder, Luke lowered himself down to next Leia. He nodded once at Rey, and then turned his focus to Ben, his hands also hovering over her bondmate. She realized, Dev had said blood, bond, or healing. They were giving him the part of him in their souls, too. Tears fell unbidden as the energy under her fingers increased again, and Rey felt more presences in the Force.

She felt someone kneel next to her, and turned to find Dev. They shared a glance worth the years of struggles they had overcome to reach that moment. Someone appeared next to him, and she realized it was Jacen. He didn’t say a word, but his bright, regretful eyes said everything words couldn’t. Tionne knelt on the other side of him, and the energy in Rey’s hands swelled again.

One by one, Alema and Jaina, Kyp and Corran, Rayf and Dorsk, and Dal and Clighal all huddled around him. Even Cade knelt with them. Though they had died as enemies, whatever this was transcended beyond the hate they carried at the end of their lives. Whatever this place was, it called to the people who had loved him. Next to Luke, the man with the sandy-blonde hair, and a beautiful brunette woman knelt with their hands hovering over Ben like the others. She had never met them, but somehow she knew who they were. Anakin and Padme. Padme wasn’t Force-sensitive, however. How could she be there? What was this place?

Then another, achingly familiar presence knelt by Ben’s head. She released a shuddering breath as her eyes met Han Solo’s. He rewarded her with his famous grin, placing his hands over his son like the others. Chewie appeared next to him. Rey smiled as Ben was surrounded by people who loved him. The energy in her hands grew even stronger.

The Force around her was suddenly alight with other presences. A woman in desert attire came to stand behind, and an older grey-haired man came to stand behind Anakin. A man and woman, holding hands, walked up behind Leia. Another couple came to stand behind Luke. Soon there were people Rey had never seen before standing around them. She could feel the strength of every one of their energies in the Force. That love had to be enough.

Come back to me, Ben.
The crystals grew hotter under her fingertips. She let the devotion, trust, passion, yearning, attraction, forgiveness, vulnerability, dependability, respect, loyalty, affection, tenderness, desire, intimacy, and belonging that existed between them flow through her. She let the grief of every second of love that she never got to share with him flow into him. She gave him everything she had.

She gasped as her body struggled against the life source that was flooding from her fingers. Her power was fading, but she held strong to the energy around her. The others around her bathed Ben in the blue hue of their auras. She focused on Ben, but she could feel their love.

*I love you, Ben Solo. And for once in our lives, I believe that love is enough.*

Rey focused on the throbbing energy of the Force around her. She drew it in as she inhaled, and sent it out through her fingers every exhale. The heat between her fingers seemed to pulse with the Force and take on a life of its own. Her body began to weaken; her strength drained with each breath. She felt the familiar darkness of unconsciousness creeping into her mind. Her muscles began to tighten and shake as she tried desperately to maintain a connection to the Force.

The crystals under her fingers were cooling. A violent iciness cracked through her and she collapsed forward. She opened her eyes, her vision blurry as she grasped at consciousness. The people around her had disappeared. The broken crystals in her fingers had shattered into black dust, as empty and dark as the shadows blanketing her awareness. She gasped for air as she dragged herself to his face, searching desperately for any sign of life. Tears fled down her cheeks as the realization pooled in her stomach.

*No, you can’t be gone.*

“I’m so sorry, Ben.” With her last ray of energy, she leaned forward and kissed his lips tenderly. She felt a final spark of energy pass from her lips, the last embrace between two connected souls. She lost herself in the euphoria of that energy as she slipped into unconsciousness. Peace embraced her as her heavy eyelids closed, collapsing into his arms.
Threads

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

--- CHAPTER 182 ---

Rey felt the Force surrounding her, guiding her, showing her the answers she desperately sought. It was tranquil there, cradled by the lulling vibrations of the Force. There were no mortal restraints on physical corporeality; her mind was one with the energy around her. There was no sudden enlightenment, nor answers to all of life's questions. There was no judgment passed by an
omnipotent being. There was no one else with her. Not her parents, not Han, or Leia, or Luke. Not Ben. There was only the Force. It was pure energy, neither light nor dark; she shared her energy with the cosmic universe, born of the very essence of stars.

She wondered in detachment if she was dead, but there was no fear or despair. The emotions reeling from Ben's death had dissolved. There were no emotions in the Force. Her mortal experiences of a state of consciousness were inconsequential in the eternity of the Cosmic Force. She knew if she were "dead," if Ben were "dead," there was nothing to mourn. If this was death, then she knew they were where they were supposed to be. She was at peace. Drifting in a sea of energy, she was able to see the very fabric of interwoven destinies connected to her soul. Following the threads deeper, a thousand lifetimes passed before her eyes.

Following one thread, she realized how one small choice could drastically alter fate. It all changed when Poe chose to walk away rather than Rey after Leia's funeral. Rose confronted Rey after she discovered Ben's identity, rather than confiding in Finn. Finn never interrupted their intimate moment in bed together, Poe never accused her of treason. She never left for Ilum. Ben never left the Finalizer. But as soon as the Knights of Ren arrived, Ben was usurped, tortured, and imprisoned on the ship. News of the new leadership spread to the Resistance, and Poe coordinated an attack. Chewie died helping Rey, Finn, and Rose infiltrate the Finalizer to drop the shields.

No one knew Rey's true reason to be drawn into the war was to save Ben. No one knew of their love. She tried to save the galaxy first, failing to lower the shields, because the Emergency Bridge did not fall. By the time she made it to Force Destiny, Hux was waiting for her. He stood behind the beaten and bloodied Ben, holding the fallen Jedi's lightsaber. As she entered the room, he mortally wounded her bondmate, thrusting the lightsaber through his back. She was helpless to stop him. He allowed Rey to hold Ben as he died, before strapping her into the Force Destiny machine. Without the fractured Kyber crystal in her satchel, her life was ended by the machine when the soul of Sidious took over her body. Her friends were caught and killed. She became the new face of the First Order. The First Order eventually fell, but not without years of tyrannical rule and a great loss of life.

Rey followed another thread, curious as to how a different choice would change their fate. When confronted with the treason on Barkhesh, she admitted to her feelings for Ben when manipulated by a smooth-talking Poe. He betrayed Rey, then locked her in her temple room after she provided him all the information she knew—with the sole intention of luring Ben into an ambush. In his desperation to save her, Ben abandoned the First Order and flew to the Resistance base, falling into their well-organized trap. Poe released an entire shipment of Ysalamir lizards on the base, obtained from allies of the Resistance on Myrkr. The Ysalamir repelled the Force, and, when grouped together, could create entire Force-neutral perimeters.

Why Poe had ordered the shipment weeks before he even suspected the connection between Ben and Rey was never revealed.
When Ben arrived to save her, he went onto that base essentially blind to the Force. Poe was waiting. Ben never had a chance when he crept into her room in the dead of night. And Rey never had a chance to warn him before Poe fired the fatal shot. That was a particularly traumatic death. Betrayal was the final emotion that flashed across Ben's eyes as he heard Poe congratulate Rey on her "great work," as if she were more than an unwilling pawn in his plan.

The only consolation was that Ben's death was swift. She held him through it all, only then having the chance to confess her love for him. Those last moments plagued Rey with horrific nightmares for the rest of her short life before the First Order found them.

In another thread, Ben spoke to his mother before her death, admitting to his divergence with the ideals of the First Order and lamenting what he had become. Leia explained Ben and Rey's bond to the Resistance, forging a—quite fragile—alliance between Poe and Ben before she became one with the Force. Ben helped the Resistance coordinate and launch an attack from the inside. Everything worked according to plan until Rey discovered that someone had to manually destabilize the core of the primary hypermatter-annihilation reactor. Ben never planned to make it off that ship.

Rey stole an x-wing and found Ben leaving the reactor engineering control deck. The expression on his face when he saw her was absolute devastation. She grabbed his hand, and they sprinted down the corridors to the hangar, though she sensed in Ben's mind that it was an exercise in futility. They both felt the tremor of the destabilization in the Force, but she didn’t try to contain it with the Force that time; ending the First Order was too important. He wrapped his arms around her waist as she ran, pinning her against the nearest wall. “Ben, we have to go!” she screamed. But it was useless; they both knew it. Instead, he cupped her face in his large hands, kissing her as they met their fate in the form of a blinding flash of bright light. As far as death went, that one was oddly and comfortably peaceful.

She followed many different threads where they lost the battle to Sidious. In some threads, Ben exchanged his life and the fate of the galaxy to save her in Force Destiny. In other threads, she went with Sidious. In some threads, Sidious and his Dark Army were resurrected, and Ben and Rey died trying to defeat them. In many threads, she didn’t win her battle with the darkness in the Carbonite room, or he didn’t win his. There were threads where she didn’t control the blast, or Finn died before he could stab Sidious, or Sidious wasn’t distracted enough to be killed. She found no other thread where they had won.

In this place, Rey remembered her conversation with Dev. He was right; there were thousands of possibilities for that future, but only one that saved the galaxy. There were threads where Dev had told her what happened to Ben in the end. She understood why he had chosen not to tell her. Ben had to die to save the galaxy; there was no other way. In the threads where she knew his fate, she did everything in her power to save him, and it cost them everything. Dev knew it was Ben’s destiny to fall, and he guided Rey to help save the galaxy. They won. She knew wherever Ben was, he would have been grateful to give his life to save them all.
As Rey followed more threads, it became clear that, no matter the choices they made, Ben did not often survive the war. In one, he was executed by the Resistance. He had convinced Rey to hate him, so she wouldn't have to witness his death. In another, he was executed by the First Order, chin lifted in proud defiance, staring down his fate without fear in his eyes. There were several threads where her fate was dependent upon his. If her life was in danger—by the Knights, Sidious, Hux, or even the Resistance—he readily exchanged his life for hers, despite her screams, pleas or sobs. No matter the circumstances, he spent his last seconds staring unwaveringly into her eyes, glistening with unshed tears of regret and love.

He fell saving her, saving Finn for her, saving his mother, even saving Sidious. He fell in battle, on the Finalizer, in the Silencer, and alone on a backwater planet. In some threads, he fell still shrouded in darkness. In others, as a final act of selflessness. In most threads, he fell at the hands of others. But there were also threads where he fell at her hand, or even his own.

The most memorable threads she witnessed were not of Ben's death at all, but hers. There were no lengths he wouldn't go to try to heal her, to give his life for hers, even when she fell by his hand. He always had hope, some deeply entrenched belief that it was not her fate to die. In many threads, he was right, but, occasionally, hope was not enough.

There were threads when he found her, already severed from her mortal coil—when there was no hope to save her. Inhuman, primal howls and whimpers, sounds beyond words, were torn from the deepest parts of his soul until his voice gave out. She could almost see the scar it cleaved into his soul, and she believed that if that version of him did live again in another life, he would carry that scar with him in some capacity.

In every thread he held her, even when he delivered the fatal wound, refusing to release her from his arms even when in mortal danger. No matter his role in her death, he believed himself responsible, whispering “I'm sorry” through shuddering sobs. He threatened anyone who attempted to touch her or take her away from him. He was forced to be physically restrained, stunned, or wounded to remove her body from him. He was never able to find peace without her, his guilt too insurmountable.

In those threads, when he held her as she died, he promised to live a life worthy of her love. In most, her death devastated him, and he ended his own suffering. In some, he lived in self-imposed exile after her death, sentencing himself to loneliness for the remainder of his years as the galaxy was destroyed around him. In others, the anger and darkness overcame him, and he fell to darkness again.

In the overwhelming majority of threads, however, it was he who died, not her. In most, she held him as he took his last breath. Her paths were different in every life, but they were all marked by
eternal loneliness and a hollow wound in her soul where their bond had once been, as if she once had wings that had been brutally severed.

In most threads, he fell to darkness; it was what brought them together. And in most threads, she tried to save him from the darkness, and he helped her in return.

In some threads, she was too late to save him. In those threads, he always died before the end of the war. In other threads, she fell to darkness, too.

In some threads, fate was less kind to them both—or perhaps kinder, depending upon the perspective—and they died wrapped in each other's arms. Nothing would keep them apart. She found the end to those lives particularly comforting.

In some threads, very few threads, they survived the war together by escaping to the Unknown Regions. In those threads, they found happiness and belonging in each other and were never alone again. But the galaxy fell to Sidious and his Dark Army in their absence. As selfish as it was, part of Rey momentarily wished she could have been so lucky to live one of those threads.

Rey felt the emotions attached to every thread as if she’d lived them, but as each one faded away, the peace and balance returned to her consciousness. The threads seemed infinite as she followed them. Perhaps the threads were thousands of possibilities, perhaps they were thousands of lives lived, but Rey believed they were thousands of different universes. They were all lived simultaneously, each choice branching into a new universe that affected her destiny.

Most threads were parallel to the lives they lived, the war they fought, the history they knew. But when she moved beyond the threads of the war of their galaxy, she found hope in the threads that ended very differently. Those other threads were beyond her time, in eras and galaxies she had never experienced, but in most of them, he lived through the struggles they faced. There were many threads from those places beyond her galaxy, where they existed without the Force and lived long, happy lives together. No matter when or where they had lived, the one constant—and comfort—was they always found each other.

There were thousands of threads, but none were quite like the one she had lived. He had fallen, but her love had helped save him. He saved the galaxy but still died in her arms. And in a final hope, she had given everything she had to save him. She was floating, one with the Force, so that meant she had failed.

Didn't it?
Rey noticed that one of the threads was thicker, more illuminated than the rest. There was a magnetism that drew her to it, a warm familiarity that called to her. Rey followed the thread until it sparked brightly into a blinding white light.
Discussion of death
Chapter Notes

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Rey’s eyes fluttered open to the jarring intensity of artificial lights and the comforting hum of an engine. Finn's concerned face was haloed in the beautiful light, but she knew she couldn't be dead. She felt pain, a deep ache in her body and her soul. She recognized the room as it came into focus. She was still on the Millennium Falcon, in the room she had collapsed in, the room where she had tried to save Ben.

“You?" she asked sleepily, closing her eyes to shut out the harsh light.

“I'm right here, Rey," he said softly. “I'll always be right here. That was so stupid; you nearly died. But you'll be okay. You have to be. You're the strongest person I know. You have to wake up now and show them all how strong you are.” It had felt like an instant and an eternity since she had last seen him.

“Okay.” His hand grasped hers, and she lifted herself slowly to a seated position. “Where's Ben?” she asked with hope, believing that she had been destined to save him. She had seen thousands of lives, after all; this one was different.

*It has to be different; he has to be okay.*

It was the little tells that gave Finn away. The slight tremble of his lip, the bob of the apple of his throat, the glistening in his eyes. He grasped her hands in his, as much a comfort to himself as it was to her. With a long exhale and a shake of his head, he said the words that would change the rest of her life:

“I'm sorry, Rey.”

His eyes shifted behind her, and she didn't need to turn to know she would see Ben's body lying there under the grey blanket. She could feel his absence like a wound in the Force. “Ben needs you to be strong now. Fight through this for him.”

There was not a doubt in her mind that she would remember this day for the rest of her life. She wished she could fall back into the tranquil energy and detached acceptance of the Force. Even if she knew they would live a thousand more lifetimes, even if she believed Ben was safe in the Force, this was the path she had to follow for the foreseeable future. She could suffer here—grief,
loneliness, remorse, misery—they were all integral parts of the human condition, and she was tormented by every single one to the depths of her being.

Mortality was too painful. She understood the hell that Leia had suffered at the loss of a soul mate when Han was murdered. His life had been taken by the boy he had tried desperately to save, whom they all had tried to save. Rey was thankful Leia did not live to see the loss of her son, just when she had come so close to saving him. Ben may have been saved in the way that counted, but it was not enough. What did it matter if he turned, if he was never able to live the life of his choosing, free of the whispers and the darkness that tormented him? He never got to experience a simple life of love, support, belonging, and happiness. He never knew what could be. All he knew in his short life was loneliness and pain.

Not quite, nearly, almost—that should be my epitaph, he had once told her. Ben had believed his life was a “compilation of almost.” It had angered her then, when he held the galaxy in his grasp, but it acquired a different meaning after he died. His entire life had been reduced to one word—almost. Almost different than his grandfather. Almost unburdened by his past. Almost free. Almost happy. Almost together. Almost saved. It hurt, because almost had given her heart hope. But that was all it could have been—hope—because almost would never be enough. It was just a cruel depiction of what could have been.

Ben had fought valiantly against the darkness for her, had sacrificed everything, had endured the pain of a broken soul to come back to her. Rey remembered every moment from their first together to their last. There had been pivotal moments, but, just like his fall, there was no singular moment that led to his turn. He had fought through hell to claw his way back…and paid for it with his life. He had been tormented and tortured from the moment he was born, and it seemed almost like mercy that his suffering had ended.

But how was that fair? How could she hold hope in the greater good when such a tragic destiny had been bestowed upon a boy born with such a loving heart? He was doomed by his bloodlines before he took his first breath; he never had a chance. Even though the odds had been stacked against them from the beginning, they had found a way to save him. But the Force had stolen him from her anyway. Ben was supposed to be with her on their journey. She was supposed to have time to know the real him. They were supposed to have the rest of their lives together. They were never supposed to be alone again. But she was alone, and life moved forward without him.

She did not let her grief consume her, living a life worth living in his memory. The first planet she visited was Chandrila and the lake that they had known together in their dreams. It looked the same as it had in her dreams, though it wasn’t as beautiful without him there. She visited every single planet he had shown her in the sky the night they spent under the stars. Most of the galaxy still knew him as the monster that was Kylo Ren, killed by the Jedi Resistance hero who had become a legend, a symbol of hope for the galaxy.
Rey found it difficult to hold her tongue when they told stories of the evil creature that had plagued the galaxy. They laughed at his death, and, if they recognized her, lauded her for killing him. She never made excuses for what he had done, only wished the galaxy knew him beyond the monster he once was. But she was cursed to be the only one left who knew the man behind the mask. It was a secret that festered in her soul. More than one altercation ended with the darkness overwhelming her enough to strike those with particularly sharp tongues with her staff or incapacitate them with the Force. It wasn't long before she heard whispers of the Jedi who loved a monster.

But on her travels away from the propaganda of the Core worlds, she also heard the myth of a man named Ben Solo, the son of legends, who helped the Jedi save the galaxy. Those who had heard the myth called him a hero for defeating the evil Kylo Ren. But none had heard the story of the fallen Jedi who fell in love with the scavenger from Jakku. Well, none had heard it until they met her.

She thought hearing the stories of Kylo Ren would be the worst part of living without him. But as time passed, the stories of Kylo Ren slowly faded, overshadowed by the true evil in the galaxy of Darth Vader or Sidious. Kylo Ren had suddenly become "not evil enough" in their eyes—none of his weapons destroyed star systems, he did not reign nearly ruthlessly or long enough to be feared decades later.

The First Order had fallen under his short command; it was a legacy not worth remembering. Even Armitage Hux was more infamous for his destruction of Hosnian Prime. There was no provocative information of the mysterious darksider, save for fascination and speculation, and slowly they all but forgot about him. Even the legend of the esoteric identity of the man called Ben Solo, who had materialized in the Battle of Ilum as an integral player in the destruction of the First Order, lost its intrigue over time with dwindling proof the man ever existed. The galaxy all but forgot him.

Though the galaxy forgot him, Rey found comfort in the people who had known him. She wished there was still a family member or friend who had known him his entire life she could talk to—Chewie, Han, Leia…even Luke, Dev, or Jacen—to have the chance to learn new memories of happier times. Without them, she had to be content in believing there had been happier times. But Finn was always there to listen when she needed him. He tried his best to keep his promise to Ben.

At first, it bothered Rey that they talked about him in the past tense. Her love for him was not past tense, and though he had died, her memory of him did not. It was just another reminder the galaxy had moved on without him. The platitudes bothered her more; she didn't want to hear about how he was “no longer suffering" or “in a better place." It was always kind things that they said to her face, reminding her that he gave his life to save the galaxy, and Rey tried to remind herself that it was meant with the best intentions. But she wondered if it truly mattered what was said about him if he wasn't there to hear it.

Over time, even her friends spoke of Ben less and less. His name become taboo, as if the mere
mention of him would remind her of his death. They never understood that she did not—for one second—forget that he had died. She just wanted to be reminded that he lived, and that his memory was being kept alive by someone other than her. Death hadn’t only stolen his presence from her life—it had stolen his name, his identity, the part of him that made him Ben. Death had erased Ben Solo more completely than Kylo Ren ever could. She eventually yearned for the platitudes and past tense. What he had accomplished in his fight against the darkness was all but forgotten, except by her. She never forgot him or the love they shared. But life moved forward without him.

She waited for him to come back to her as he had promised. If he could find her, she knew to the depths of her love for him that he would. In the interim, she counted her days, marking them in a journal as she had once scratched into a wall, waiting for the moment she would see him again. She watched her friends fall in love and get married. And, as time went on, she was present for the birth of their children. She witnessed their milestones and found a vicarious happiness in playing a role in their lives, especially Finn and Rose. They had a large, beautiful family—some biological children, some adopted, along with a menagerie of rescued animals like off-the-track Fathiers—and it was easy for Rey to lose herself in their chaos.

There was a part of her that was always empty, bereft. A hollow void replaced the space he once occupied in her mind; broken pieces were missing from her soul. She never found peace with the silence in her head. It wasn’t as it once had been before the bond. The silence was a wound that bled eternally, an ache that could never be soothed. It was loud and tormenting—a reminder of what she lost.

The others would speak from time to time of finding love, "starting a new chapter" in her life. When he died, it wasn’t like closing a favorite book after finishing the last page. It was like burning it. Only snippets of phrases, the most significant memories and the emotions tied to them remained. She never married or had children, never considered it. He would always be hers, and she would always be his. She had grown up alone, learned how to survive in the harshest conditions relying only on herself; she felt stronger without the fear of someone she loved being taken from her again. Even if she had met someone worth piecing her heart back together for, after experiencing the intimacy of a bond and the understanding of an equal in the Force, a normal relationship paled in comparison.

Without him, she knew she would never find the belonging she truly sought. Her friends were her family, and she loved them dearly, but it was the greatest loneliness of her life. There was a feeling of emptiness without him by her side, and filling that space he had carved out for himself inside her mind. She took him with her in her heart to every new world that she visited, speaking to him as if he were there to share it with her, but she felt his absence with every beat of her heart.

She searched for his face in crowds on her adventures, reached for his missing energy in the Force as she fell asleep, and missed the softness of his touch in the seconds just before she opened her eyes every morning. His name was on her lips with every breath she took. He was with her in the untamed power of the waves she swam in, the warm kiss of the sun's rays on her face, and the gentleness of the wind in green meadows that fluttered through her hair like a breath.
Some days she felt the prickling sensation on the back of her neck that preempted his energy in their connection, but the sensation would fade away as quickly as it had appeared. She swore she heard his comforting voice in her dreams, but when she woke, she never remembered what he whispered. In the dreams she did remember, when she visited their quiet lake, she could almost feel his presence over her shoulder, but when she turned, he was never there. In the quiet moments when she read, she would swear she could smell the unique blend of soaps, leather, and ozone that was Ben, but when she searched for the source, she could never find it. Every night she spent staring at a mirrorbright moon she was reminded of the brightness of his soul in the center of darkness. In those moments, she would feel the magnetism of his fervent stare. Those were the moments she felt closest to him. But the sun always rose, and life moved forward without him.

Her love for him lasted long past her memories of him. Over time the memories of his boyish smile...those piercing brown eyes...the softness of his lips...the warmth of his hands...the subtle emotions that flickered across his expressive face...all faded. She would try her best to recall, but the little nuances became more difficult to remember. She forgot what it looked like when he chewed his words in the moments he was anxious, or the way his jaw clenched when he attempted to control his anger, or the finesse of his movements when he wielded his wild and fierce lightsaber.

She forgot the exact path of the scar on his face, or the way his hair fell in his eyes as he slept. She forgot the understanding on his face before Luke interrupted them in the hut, the intensity in his eyes after he had defeated Sidious, or the sensation of being wrapped in his arms in the navigation room. She remembered the words he said but couldn't recall just how he said them, as the sound of his voice was the first memory to go. The emotions stayed, but everything else about him slowly faded away. She didn't have a single holopicture to remember him by, and though she forgot the little things, she never forgot the way he made her feel—she never forgot him.

The grief was always present, though it transformed over time. It was more manageable as the years stretched on, but there were still moments when the waves of grief crashed over her; when she heard mention of the First Order, when she experienced places they had vowed to visit together, or even when she walked through certain areas of the Millennium Falcon. A laugh in a crowded cantina, a character on a holodrama, a forest, the snow, the stars, a lightsaber, the rain, a fire, all could cause the grief to swell again. There were other times it made less sense, such as a sudden wave of grief at 3:38 in a random morning.

She wore the testament of their love—a pair of golden dice and a strip of his cowl—as a reminder that he was once more than just memories. Her only other proof of his existence was the gaping wound that would eternally exist where their bond had once been. Their bond had been broken, but the connection of their souls never died. He was alive, if only in her unwavering love for him. But life moved forward without him.

She grew older, still keeping her promise to him to fight the darkness every day, but she struggled
to find balance without him. In her older age, she searched for purpose. With the help of Luke's guidance in the Force, she began her own Jedi temple, promising to honor Ben and Luke with the children that she trained. But there was unbalance in the Force. She knew she should have foreseen it—that if there was light, darkness would rise to meet it. In hindsight, she believed Ben would have noticed it. But she was blinded by her desire to find purpose.

Her failure was with twin orphans named Taryn and Thexan, with whom she found an immediate connection. Taryn was hopeful and full of light. She was levelheaded and resourceful, strong and determined; she had helped the pair survive in harsh conditions before they were found. Taryn always wore her hair back in a long, single braid, and Rey wondered if it served a similar purpose to what her buns had. Taryn was never forthcomyng about her past, but Rey understood that better than anyone.

Taryn’s brother Thexan may have looked more like her best friend, Finn, but his personality reminded Rey of her Ben. He was emotional, sensitive, intense, yet strong with the Force. He was not nearly the model student his sister was, but his control of the Force was unparalleled. Rey could sense his struggle with darkness. She was determined not to let history repeat itself.

The problem was, the Republic Systems Alliance hadn’t counted on a group of First Order sympathizers stealing the slab of Carbonite from the prison on Megalox Beta. They didn’t count on those sympathizers allowing thawing Sidious from his prison and allowing him to die. They hadn’t expected them to find use the Force Destiny machine on Jakku to revive him into a strong, young, Force-sensitive body. But most of all, while he waited in death in the World Between Worlds, they hadn’t expected him to seek revenge by infiltrating the mind of a Jedi at Rey’s temple.

Rey was too focused in throwing her heart into helping Thexan; she gave him every last moment she could spare, determined to save him from the darkness that had claimed Ben. And, slowly, he flourished under her attention. He was becoming a strong Jedi as he learned to control his darkness. Rey was so focused on his progress that she missed the signs of a familiar darkness growing in Taryn. She believed Ben wouldn't have missed it, that he could have saved them. But he wasn't there.

If he had been, perhaps he would have seen how the once sociable Taryn became reclusive, quick to temper, and obsessed with perfection. Perhaps he would have sensed the whispers as he had once observed in Rey. Perhaps he would have noticed how Taryn watched her brother and the Jedi Master from afar with growing resentment, believing the lies of a monster. That resentment toward Rey grew until one fateful night. Taryn followed her brother and Rey to the temple and overheard Rey's praises of the young man. Rey told him he was "like the son she never had." As an orphan, all Taryn had ever wanted was belonging and acceptance, but no matter how hard she tried, she saw the attention Rey gave Thexan as favor. Nothing she did—in her mind—was ever good enough.
Betrayal overwhelmed her in darkness as the puppetmaster pulled his strings. Taryn waited for Rey to leave the temple that night. She lurked in the shadows for her twin brother, and, in her jealousy, she sealed her destiny. She stepped out of the shadows and plunged her lightsaber through her brother's chest. Thexan never had the chance to fight back...or perhaps chose not to. After feeling the disturbance in the Force, Rey found the young man fatally wounded on the floor of the temple. She tried in vain to save his life, while Taryn slaughtered the remainder of her students and fled the planet. Thexan died in Rey's arms, an echo of a loss she suffered decades before. The loss of Thexan forced her to relive the loss of Ben again. But she couldn't find the opportunity to grieve when the galaxy was in danger. They were both gone, and time moved forward without them.

As Taryn's darkness grew, so did her power in the galaxy. A New Order was born. Poe Dameron's son, Kes, led the rebellion in defense of the galaxy. And Rey watched helplessly as history repeated itself: Kes and Taryn fell in love after the fallen Jedi saved him from his broken starfighter in battle.

Rey, war-weary and jaded, tried her best to save them from each other, save them from the fate that she and Ben had been doomed to suffer. She understood the Force, she knew how their story would end. But her efforts only forced them together. Rey tricked Sidious into a confrontation and locked him in a prison to live out the rest of his mortal days. And in a final battle that saved the galaxy, Kes saved his love from darkness. That was little consolation to Rey as they died in each other's arms.

Rey shut herself off from the Force after their loss, losing hope by then that Ben would ever return to her. She believed that if her light was missing from the Force, then perhaps the Force would finally find balance. Rey abandoned the remains of her Jedi temple and returned to the island on Ahch-To to live out the rest of her days in solitude. She wasn't alone completely; the caretakers kept her company. She missed her visits with Luke and felt numb and lost in a life without the Force. But Finn and Rose would visit with their children around the anniversary of Ben's passing. It wasn't the happiest life, but she kept her promise to Ben, living her life and keeping his memory alive. And time moved forward without him.

On the night of her death, she finally opened herself up to the Force after decades without it. The energy moving around her was like the caress of an old friend. Finn had passed away years before, and Rose had left that night after one final visit, both deciding they were too old to travel anymore. It was time. Frail and weary, Rey followed a path down to the shore to share her last moments with the moon. Her skin was wrinkled from a harsh life in the sun, her hair lifeless and grey, her eyes hollow and lonely. The marks in her journal counting down her days had reached over twenty thousand. And in the moonlight, she finally found him. The man she knew fleetingly a lifetime ago. The man she loved for a lifetime. His dark, passionate eyes were softer than she remembered. The crooked smile was more carefree. His energy was no longer heavy with the weight of the galaxy. He was at peace. And that gave her peace. She was ready.

“I promised I would come back,” he said. Her breath caught at the sound of the voice she had been waiting for decades to hear, tears streaming down her weathered cheeks.
“It took you long enough.” She smiled her last, her fingers gingerly caressing the worn dice around her neck. When he reached her side, he offered his hand to her, palm up, an echo of a gesture from a lifetime before.

“Join me, sweetheart?” he asked, and this time she happily took his hand.

Rey followed him into the light without fear, knowing that wherever they were going, they would be together. They were at peace. Everything was finally as it should have been all along. As she followed him, their hands clasped tightly, the light became blinding until all she could see and feel was its warmth. Then she heard another voice.

“She's waking up.”
Chapter End Notes

Discussion of death
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
"She's waking up."

Rey opened her eyes, blinking at the bright lights. Machines beeped and whirred around her. The artificial air smelled like cleaning chemicals. Weakness gripped her muscles, but she was not in any pain. As her vision cleared, she realized she was in a bed in a small room with artificial lights, surrounded by machines. She sensed others in the room with her.

"Where...where..." she croaked weakly, swallowing to moisten her dry throat.

"Rey, you're safe." She knew that voice, and, apparently, he knew her, too. Her mind was heavy, thought processes leaden with sleep. Had she had more of her faculties, the words might have frightened her, but even her most instinctual impulses—to fight, to run, to understand—were silent. She didn't question, she simply existed. Until he spoke again. "Don't worry. You're in a medbay on Bespin. You just need to take it slow, okay? The med droid will be here soon...hopefully."

"A medbay?" The words slowly seeped through the deep fog. All at once she knew that she should care, but she couldn't form coherent enough thoughts to articulate the questions something was guiding her to remember to ask. She pressed against the fettering haze clouding her thoughts, but she couldn't remember anything. It didn't concern her as much as it did the thing inside her, persistent in guiding her thoughts away from the peaceful ignorance in which she existed. Her mind began sluggishly forming questions. Somehow, she knew her name was Rey. But had she known before he said it? She wasn't certain. How had she ended up in a medbay? Why was she there? What had she been doing before?

A spark.

That question—that was the question the thing inside her was guiding her to ask. If only she could find the words to ask him. She stiffly scanned her body for clues to...what? She didn't know. Her movements were enervated and clumsy.

"You have been out of it for a few days, so, whatever you do, be calm; don't panic," he recommended gently.

Another spark.

Fear returned with the desire to...run? Fight? Her thoughts were still too jumbled to form an appropriate plan of action.

"Don't panic?" She sat up abruptly, hitting her head on the transparent cocoon top of a medical pod. She was instantly light-headed and nauseous. But it jolted her further from the cloud weighing her consciousness. Thoughts flooded into her mind, overwhelming her.

*It's too cold in here. I think I'm going to be sick. Where are my clothes? I need water. I'm scared. I know him. Why am I here? Blink, he's blurry. Am I hurt? Why is it still blurry? How do I get out of here? Why am I so tired? The lights are too bright. Nothing hurts. When was the last time I slept? That's right, I just woke up. My name is Rey. I am in a medbay. What was I doing before this? Why shouldn't I panic?*
"Sorry, I tried to warn you; I did that, too," he chuckled, "At least you don't have the Bacta suit on anymore; you should have seen what I did with mine." He helped lift the lid of the pod and supported her as she slowly sat up. As her mind became less burdened, she had more confidence in articulating her thoughts. Rey turned toward her friend.

"Finn," she smiled lazily, blinking to clear her still blurry vision. He smiled when she mentioned his name.

"You have no idea how good it is to see you awake and hear you say my name. You scared us with that crazy stunt of yours. It took us so long to reach Bespin, but this is the only place that would help. We're lucky Lando met us halfway with his freighter stocked with Bacta suits. Rose just left to update him and Poe about how you're doing." She still could not remember what happened, and trepidation slowly built in her chest, but the mention of her friends' names was a relief. It meant whatever happened, they were all okay.

"I didn't think you would make it, Rey. I thought I would never get a chance to tell you how sorry I am, for everything. I love you; I hope you know that." He reached out and grabbed her hand. The warmth was comforting, but there was something else. She stared at their hands clasped together, and the thing inside her guided her to focus on it. Something about the warmth of his hand in hers was supposed to remind her of an important detail she was forgetting. It was something her heart desperately wanted to find. Or missed experiencing.

*He's sorry. Maybe we had a fight before...whatever happened? Maybe that's it.*

"I love you too, Finn," she assured him. "You are the only family I have."

Another spark.

She didn't know why she had said it, but the thing inside her told her it was important. What was she missing? Fear. There was fear. And guilt.

*Am I afraid to lose him?*

Another spark.

*I don't want to lose you,* echoed in her mind.

That must be it; they must have had a falling out. She could not remember what he could possibly be sorry for, but, at the moment, it did not matter to her. She was just happy to see him. He was her best friend.

*Whatever happened, it doesn't matter now.* She embraced him, thankful that he was there with her.

But that something inside was relentless, pushing her, guiding her, to remember...what? The fear was an endless feedback loop that escalated in intensity. She was scared, but she didn't know why she was scared, which scared her more. All she knew was there was something important she was missing, but she didn't have the slightest idea how to remember what it was. She looked around, still trying to remember how she had ended up there. That seemed to be the key. She studied his face for a clue and noticed he was holding something back. Hesitation rested on his features as if he was mentally trying to prepare himself to tell her something important.

*He is afraid of me remembering. Then he knows the answer.*

"I can't remember before," her voice trembled in confusion, her mind grappling with the fog. "What happened?" He did not seem surprised by her admission, but he did seem disappointed.
He closed his eyes, bracing himself for her answer. "Do you remember me?" His voice was
trembling with uncertainty, and she wondered briefly why he would fear she had forgotten him.
Why he would expect that, even though she had already said his name?

"Yes...."

"And the Resistance?" There was something specific his questions were attempting to discern, but
she couldn't figure out what. She knew it mattered. He was fearful of her remembering something
—something important—but simultaneously concerned that she did not remember anything at all.
She was not naïve; whatever he was hesitant for her to remember, it wasn't good. And based on his
demeanor, it was much worse than a fight between friends.

"Yes, our friends, and the war."

Another spark.

The war. That something inside—the Force, she realized—wanted her to remember the war. "I just
don't remember what happened before I woke up. Why am I here?"

"I was told specifically not to say anything until they had examined you," he sighed.

It was clear that he was conflicted about telling her. She knew Finn well enough to know he was
terrible at keeping secrets, so she persisted. "What happened, Finn? You're my best friend; you're
supposed to be on my side." She bit her thumb to suppress a smile. He knew her tactic, but she
knew it had worked.

Her smile faltered, however, as he drew in an uneven breath, preparing himself. "I'm not going to
tell you. They said...they said if we rush your memory while it is still fragile, it could be too much,
you could lose everything." She opened her mouth to protest as he paused, but he lifted his hand in
a forestalling attempt to silence her. "But if you remember on your own... Look, Rey, if you
remember me, and the Resistance, and the war, then it's not all missing. What is the last thing you
remember?"

She sighed in frustration.

Nothing...I remember the war....

A spark.

The Resistance fighting against the First Order....

Another spark.

The Resistance...I remember you, Rose, Leia...no, Leia's gone...Poe...Poe is the general now...We
were on Barkhesh...But we left...I went to Ilum.

Another spark.

What were we doing on Ilum...My Kyber crystal...the avalanche...I fell... The Force was vibrating
with an intensity inside her. The relief of remembering assuaged her fears.

"I remember the avalanche," she said confidently, "That's why I'm here."

But his eyes were pooling with sorrow. The fear returned. She was wrong, the Force inside her
made that perfectly clear. She was direly wrong. "You don't remember anything else?"
She shook her head nervously, her eyes pleading with his to end her suffering in limbo. He dropped his head solemnly, rubbing his cheek against his shoulder to hide the tear that had fallen down his face. "Rey, I don't know what to do here. If I tell you...this could devastate you. If you're already having trouble remembering like they feared, knowing could cause your memories to fracture. They said it was important to let you remember on your own. Is it worth knowing if you could lose all of your memories permanently?"

Her thoughts were consumed with one terrifying dichotomy: would it be more agonizing to never know the truth or to know a truth so terrible it tore you apart?

She was finding it more difficult to breathe, a foreboding alarm screaming in her soul. "Would you want to know?"

He swallowed apprehensively, wringing his hands. "Yeah, I would."

"Listen, Finn, when I first woke up, I couldn't remember anything. But certain thoughts I had, or things you said, triggered another memory. Maybe if you just guide me in the right direction? Then I can remember on my own. But the Force inside me is begging me to remember. I have to know."

"I can't believe I'm doing this. But it's their fault for leaving me alone with you. I hope this isn't a stupid decision," he said reluctantly. "Do you remember the Finalizer?"

A spark in the Force.

*The Finalizer...yes, the First Order ship...we were there...why were we there?*

Another spark.

Her head throbbed as she tried to access the memories.

*When was the last time I saw Finn...the last thing I remember is still the avalanche...no, I remember giving him my lightsaber, that was after...there was a fight with stormtroopers in the snow.*

Another spark, stronger this time.

*No, I remember after that...I remember seeing Finn in a control room...It was the bridge of the Finalizer!*

The sparks were growing in intensity, the cloud over her mind dissipating as her memories connected.

*We were disabling their systems for the Resistance...no, that still wasn't the last time I saw him...he was carrying me to the Falcon...and then he was dragging me...and I was fighting him...I threatened him with my lightsaber...and then I used the Force on him and ran away...* Why did I run away?

The intensity of the last spark ripped a gasp from her lungs.

"Did I...fight you, Finn? Did I throw you against a wall and threaten you with my lightsaber and use the Force to knock you out?" Her fear and remorse escalated as the memories continued to break through the haze.

He nodded, his eyes glossy. "Shhh..." he murmured, trying to calm her, his thumb rubbing soothing circles on her hand. "It's fine, I'm fine. But you're getting upset already. I think we need to wait for
someone with knowledge of...this...to help with your memories."

"No, it's not fine! I'm so sorry! Why would I do that? I don't even know how to do that! I would have had to use Ben's...."

Her heart jolted at his name, the Force sparking like a live wire.

"Ben...I was running to Ben."

Ben! her scream reverberated in her consciousness. That was it, he was the person the Force had been attempting to guide her to. His name shattered through the fog in her mind.

_I was running to Ben...why...he left me...where did he go?_

Her body vibrated with the knowledge that she was close; she would have her explanation soon if she only answered that question.

_Come back!_ echoed in her thoughts. Was it a memory?

_I'll come back for you, sweetheart, I promise,_ Ben's voice whispered from her captive memories. She paused. Finn was studying her fixedly, wary as he watched the terrifying awareness slowly tighten in her face.

_Ben, where are you?_

Yes, that was the question the Force wanted her to ask.

There was something...an uneasiness growing inside her. Remembering the fear Finn had of whatever he couldn't tell her, she began to wonder if she even _wanted_ to know where he was. But there was a memory there just beyond the haze, so close she could almost touch it. There were brief flashes of color – white trees, golden dice, indigo light, crimson shirt. Rey tried to force herself to remember what had happened, what those flashes meant, but the memory was fracturing before her eyes.

She wouldn't let go.

She had to know what happened.

"Rey!" Finn warned. He sounded far away, fear escalating in his voice as he watched her body shake in her fight for her memories. Darkness clouded her vision; her grasp on the conscious world was failing. "Rey, stop!" He grabbed her shoulders strongly, steadying her, grounding her. She shut her eyes, ignoring him. Sweat poured from her forehead, her heart throbbed in her ears.

"Where's Ben!?” she gasped, jumping to her feet, wavering and unstable as she searched for balance. Finn stood and grabbed her arm to steady her.

A whisper from months before, in a throne room, breathed through the Force. _Do you want to know the truth? Or have you always known? You've just hidden it away. Say it._

"I couldn't save you," she finally admitted to herself as the memories flashed in her mind. She remembered their indigo-hued kiss, her fight to drag him to the escape shuttle, his last breath as his energy faded in the Force, her attempt to save him on the _Millennium Falcon_ and everything in between.

_Ben...._
"Rey..." Finn's eyes overflowed with sympathy and concern. She sat down slowly. A crushing pressure in her chest stole her breath.

That is what he didn't want to tell me. He didn't want to tell me about Ben. It didn't work. I failed. Ben is dead.

The moment felt terrifyingly familiar, as if she had experienced it before, and knew the words Finn would say. I'm sorry. He's gone.

She instinctively searched for Ben's energy in the bond, but it was a hollow void. She gasped and began sobbing into her hands. "I remember," she cried. "I remember everything." I can't do this again, she thought, though she didn't know where the thought had come from. Finn sighed and joined her on the pod.

"You've got your memories back, that's...a start, Rey," he said gently, resting his hand on her shoulder in an attempt to soothe her. "But you still need to take it slow. It's a lot to absorb. You've been in a coma for days, you're in a fragile state mentally. I can explain everything to you after they talk to you." She remembered everything, what was there to explain?

"Explain what?" Her hands dropped from her face as she studied him. He eyed her pointedly, huffing in frustration. "Explain what, Finn?"

"About Ben," he answered, his tone cautious. "I'll tell you everything as soon as I can, I promise."

What is there left to explain?

She turned to him, eyes wide. Her heart was caught in a purgatory between despair and hope.

"Is Ben...?" her voice cracked, her body trembling in anticipation. She couldn't finish, she held her breath. The same concern flickered across his eyes. This was it. His words would determine the rest of her life. Fractures of memories of another life whispered across her mind—a life of lonely adventures, a fallen Jedi, a galaxy at war, isolation on an island, and a final moment under the moon.

No, I don't want that life, please...don't say it. Please.

"He's here," Finn sighed, rubbing the back of his neck anxiously, "I'll take you to him as soon as...."

She inhaled sharply, grasping him roughly by the shoulders, eyes burning into his. "Finn! Just tell me! Is he...alive?"

Please, for the love of the Force I'll do anything, please.

"Well, he's..." he started, but thought better of it. "Yes, he's alive, Rey," he said, the same hesitation furrowing his brow. "But we need to wait...." She threw her arms around her friend in exhilaration, nearly knocking him over. "Rey, wait..." he said more sternly. But she couldn't wait. Ben was alive. They saved him.

She sprinted into the hall, knocking over a medical droid. "Rey, come back!" Finn pleaded behind her.

"Ben?" she shouted, scanning the rooms for him. "Ben!" She felt lightheaded and off-balance, but nothing would stop her from finding him. It was more difficult than she expected; he was still missing from their bond. She closed her eyes, reaching into the Force. His energy...she could feel
his energy around her. Her senses were still muddled—his energy was faint compared to the volatile storm she was used to, and she couldn't pinpoint exactly where he was—but she would recognize that energy anywhere.

"Ben!" she screamed in exhilaration. She heard the commotion of crashing machines behind her and turned. Ben came sliding out of a room down the hall, head scanning the corridor in a frantic search for her.

"Ben..." He heard her voice and turned.

*Please don't be a dream.*

The Force inside her, however, assured her that this was no dream. Every emotion she had felt since his death shuddered through her body. Rey covered her mouth as sobs escaped unbidden. She stood frozen in place, praying that he didn't disappear. It felt as if it had been a lifetime since she had seen him alive. Her legs trembled underneath her as she gazed upon his familiar form, something she believed she would never see again. He looked as perfect as she had imagined he would.

His lips were parted, his dark hair fell haphazardly in messy waves around his face. His intense eyes were locked onto hers...how she missed those eyes. Images of his lifeless body flashed in her mind, reminding her relentlessly that she almost lost him. But he was alive, standing only a few meters from her.

*He's here. He's real. It's over.*

Ben studied her, his brows furrowed, as if he did not believe she was real either. He just stood there with *that* look on his face, the one when she had summoned the lightsaber on Starkiller. One day she would ask him the meaning behind that look. Her heart skipped a beat as she realized she could say "one day" again.

All she could manage to say was, "You came back."

If Rey had imagined how she would react seeing him alive after all hope was lost, she would have envisioned running to him and jumping into his arms. The hurricane of emotions that crashed through her body with that thought overwhelmed her, and she collapsed to the floor, her head in her hands, as she sobbed uncontrollably.

*He's alive...he's alive...he's alive.*

She sensed him cautiously approach until he was looming over her, but she couldn't say a word through her sobs. Ben knelt to the ground in front of her, hesitant to move or say a word. The sound of his uneven breaths was comforting. When she raised her swollen eyes to look up at him, however, she wasn't met with the warm, understanding, reverent eyes she had come to know. These were different, somehow. His head was cocked, and his distant and guarded air reminded her of the man she had met on Starkiller. His brows creased with agitation, his eyes searching hers intently for...something.

*I don't understand.*

The warmth of the joy of their reunion slipped away like the sun behind a cloud. "What's wrong?"

*Please touch me. Tell me you love me. Tell me I made the right decision to bring you back. Please, don't do this. I need you right now.*
"Your eyes...I feel like I've known you all my life," his voice was soft with awe, and a sob escaped her throat at the comforting sound she never thought she would hear again. His words brought relief in the face of his cold demeanor.

"Me too, Ben," she sighed blissfully. "There are no words for how much I missed you." She reached for his face, her fingers hesitating mid-air in a silent entreaty for permission to touch him. His wide, boyish eyes flickered with distrust as he tilted away ever so slightly. She lowered her hand, trying to mask her disappointment, breaking the growing silence between them with feigned levity, "That's okay, Ben, we can take things slow."

"I don't...know how to be..." he stuttered, a blush blooming on his cheeks. He awkwardly brushed the hair from his forehead, the apple of his throat bobbing in apprehension, a nervous energy radiating off him.

This isn't how I thought it would be. You came back. You're alive. But it's like you're not even Ben. Do you hate me for saving you? I don't understand. After everything that happened between us, why is the love missing from your eyes?

Shifting uncomfortably under her gaze, he sighed in frustration. "Who am I to you?"

His words stung as if he'd slapped her. She jolted as if he had. "What?"

"Rey," Finn warned, walking up behind her, "We need to talk."

Her eyes remained fixed on Ben. "Clearly."

"What are you talking about?" she pressed Ben again, louder, her voice trembling.

"You want things that I can't...I'm sorry...I'm just...I don't...." He shut his eyes, grasping his temples in chagrin. He curled in upon himself, rocking on his heels before striking the cold reflective flooring with an impassioned roar. Her heart dropped with a sudden realization.

Will the Force ever stop torturing us?

"Ben...say my name," she whispered. He shook his head, refusing to raise his eyes to hers.

"Rey," Finn warned.

"Say my name," she demanded. Ben was silent. She cautiously reached for his hand still curled into a fist on the floor. "Please."

"I can't," he growled in frustration, ripping his hand away before she could feel the comfort of his touch. "I don't remember."
Chapter End Notes

Discussion of death
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Ben felt trapped. At least, he thought his name was Ben. That was what they told him, anyway, though the name seemed foreign on even their tongues. But they had told him little else, and he could remember even less. All he knew was he felt drawn to the woman kneeling in front of him, but he didn't know why.

She had shouted his name and something deep within him screamed in desperation to find her, something told him she was what he had been searching for since he awoke. It wasn't a memory, per se, but an echo of what once had been, like the imprint of a foot in wet sand. She whispered his name with reverence and lamented how much she had missed him, as if he had been gone for a long time. The way she looked at him...it was as if she intimately knew his soul.

But he didn't even know her name. And he could see it in her eyes: he was hurting her, and there was nothing he could do to help her. Based on the way she tried to touch him, they had been close. It was clear she expected him to be the man she knew, but he didn't know who that was. A brother? A cousin? A friend? A partner? A lover? A spouse? He had no idea what he was to her. Not that it mattered; he couldn't be that man even if he wanted to. She was a stranger to him. He was a stranger to himself.

Who did I used to be? What did I do? What happened to me? Why can't I remember? Do I want to remember?

He was frustrated that, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't remember a thing. He was angry that no one would give him any answers. But they told him enough in what they didn't say, the way they stared at him as if he were...a monster.

They didn't trust him. The one in charge was conflicted. There were moments the man hated Ben; he could see it in his eyes, the way his lip curled when he talked to him. But other moments he stared with sympathy and pity. That vexed Ben more than the hatred. He was fond of the kind one; he didn't fear him, but he didn't placate him either. He felt a particular camaraderie with that one—the one who presently stood behind the woman, begging her to listen.

Ben wished she would listen. She stared at him as if he had created the stars. It made him uncomfortable. He couldn't stand to look at the devotion in her familiar eyes and not remember a minute that had earned such an emotion. This woman...this woman was talking to him as if he were a child or an injured animal, feigning patience and understanding as her eyes shimmered in heartbreak. The more time he spent with her, the more frustrated he became. He had been ignoring what she was saying to him, but she reached for his face again, and he panicked.

What do you want from me!? I don't know you!

"Don't touch me!"

He hadn't meant to sound so cruel, but he was feeling more and more claustrophobic in his own skin. The woman curled in upon herself, wrapping her arms around her knees. Betrayal streamed from her eyes. He refused to look at her again. His anxious heart pounded in his ears, his chest heaving with desperation. Was he even where he was supposed to be? If they didn't trust him, should he trust them? He could be anyone. They could be anyone. They could be the enemy, the reason why he had lost his memories. They could be feeding him lies. If no one would tell him the
truth, then they must be hiding something. The man handed the woman a pack, and she withdrew several items. She sobbed as she held each one before clipping them to her belt.

The woman threw herself into the kind man's arms, and Ben was thankful she was distracted with someone else, but his name—what they told him his name was—caught his attention. "Ben just needs time. I got my memories back, so will he," she assured them both. The man had pulled her into the nearest room, and they were speaking in hushed tones, but he heard their conversation, nonetheless.

"It's not that simple, Rey..."

Rey. Somehow he knew that was her name.

"...He woke up before you. Poe and I were there. We didn't know how he would react, so we decided to be there instead of Rose. She was right when she told me she could handle him better; I should have listened. Or waited for you. But we were scared you wouldn't make it. We had no idea what he would do when he found out you risked your life for him..."

What happened?

"...But he couldn't remember much at first, not any more than you did when you first woke up. Then he started asking about his parents. Poe told him they were gone, and Ben asked how it had happened. I told him his father was killed, and his mother was sick...."

Ben couldn't remember having any conversation with anyone, especially about his mother and father. He hadn't even thought to ask about them. He had no idea who they were. Their death rang true in his heart, but without a single memory of them, he couldn't find it in himself to feel...anything. He was more concerned that he'd had conversations when he woke up that he had forgotten.

I remember waking up, I remember all the questions they asked me; they never told me anything about my past. They avoided every single question about who I am.

"...What I told him was technically the truth," the man continued, "and I was hoping he would remember everything himself before we ever had to go into more detail. He was similar to when you first woke up, as if he were still in some sort of dream state. We had no idea how fragile that state was...."

"Finn, what did you do?"

Finn.

Her concern echoed the question in his own mind. Finn was silent for a moment, and Ben forced his eyes to remain downcast where he knelt on the floor, lest they discover he could hear their conversation. It wasn't a conversation meant for his ears, but he was frustrated that no one would give him answers. And he sensed he was about to overhear why.

"He asked how his father died," Finn said, his voice strained. "I know I should have wanted to tell him of the ruthlessness I witnessed that day and remind him of the devastation he caused Poe, me, you...his mother. But I knew since looking into Ben's eyes on the Finalizer that he wasn't the man we saw on Starkiller. What he did—I owe him everything. You were right; he hasn't been Kylo Ren for a long time...."

Kylo Ren. Yes, that is who I truly am; that is what they wanted to call me. I am Kylo Ren. But who is Kylo Ren?
"... Ben asked me, *me*, 'Who killed my father?' as if he actually trusted me. He looked at me like a close friend, Rey, and begged me to be honest with him. It hurt. But seeing the desire to avenge his father's death, I knew what telling him would do to him. I thought maybe it would be better, for both of you, if he never remembered. But then I heard the words none of us can take back. 'Don't you remember? You did.' Poe said it before I could say anything."

*No... It can't be true, there must be a mistake. I wouldn't do that. Would I? I can't remember. I must have loved him; he was my father. Even if I hated him, how could I... kill him?*

*I did. I feel it now. It wasn't a mistake or an accident. What kind of person does that? They all looked at me like I was a monster when I woke up. Now I understand why. Kylo Ren is a monster who killed his own father. I am a monster.*

"... Poe didn't know what it would do to Ben, and he didn't get to explain anything else. Neither of us did. Ben freaked out. He wouldn't believe it. He started shaking like you were doing when you were trying to remember what happened to him. They think in his fragile mental state that he pushed too hard. He started seizing, and I thought we had killed him. But when he woke up again, I realized we did something much worse. Rey, I am so sorry. I know you'll never forgive me... He knows he's in a medbay, he knows basic galactic history, and life skills. But all the memories that make him...him...are lost. Everything. The med droids say he will never get them back. It is entirely possible that Ben as you knew him...is gone."

"No, no, no," she sobbed. "They're wrong, he *has* to come back."

Upon hearing her broken words, Ben stood with resolve. In that moment, he didn't know who she was to him. He didn't know who he had been before, other than a monster. He didn't know why she would care for a murderer enough to risk her life for him. But he did know that he couldn't be that man again. He wouldn't be a man who would kill his own father. And if he couldn't be that man, his mere presence would be torture to her.

Ben didn't know why, but all he cared about was her happiness. So he decided in that moment, while she was distracted with the kind man who looked at her with love in his eyes, that he would leave. For her. If there was one good thing he could do with his life, it would be to spare this woman further pain. He didn't know where he would go, or what he would do, but he would flee as far away from her as possible. If he was certain of one thing, it was that she would be happier without him.

He backed away slowly until he was out of her sight, then began walking down the corridor toward the exit. He would find a hangar and barter his way onto a ship. He had no doubt he could steal one if necessary; it was obvious he had committed morally despicable crimes before. He doubted his old self would even blink an eye at stealing. But he didn't want to be whoever that man was. He would find a way legally. If he had to sell himself into slavery to get away from there, then he would do it.

"Ben!" Her voice jolted through him, melting him inside, but he refused to stop walking. Somehow, he knew if he looked at her, he would lose his resolve. He quickened his pace.

"Stop!" she shouted, and he did. Well, *he* didn't. Something tethered him to the spot, an invisible energy that paralyzed every muscle in his body. As desperately as he pushed and pulled against his imperceptible chains, he could not physically break its hold. He could hear her footfalls as she slowly approached him, but he could not turn to look at her.

Stepping in front of him, her hand was raised, evidently controlling whatever held him. When she finally released him with a flick of her wrist, her hand remained raised in threat of further paralysis.
She didn't need the strange power, he decided, her eyes pinned him in place enough on their own. "What kind of sorcery is this?" he growled.

She jerked as if his words directed toward her held real weight. "Ben, what are you talking about? It's the Force."

"I don't know anything about the Force," he said impatiently. "Or you. Let me go." She shook her head in disbelief, and he would avert his eyes in guilt if they weren't inexplicably drawn to hers. The despair he witnessed in them was nauseating.

"Where would you go?" Her voice cracked. He could see her fingers twitch with the desire to touch him, renewing his resolve to get away from her before he caused her further pain.

"Away from this place, away from you," he said cruelly. He reminded himself that those were the words she needed to hear to be free from him, as he watched her heart shatter before his eyes.

"No. I love you, Ben. You can't leave me again. Please, stay." Her voice cracked. He could see her fingers twitch with the desire to touch him, renewing his resolve to get away from her before he caused her further pain.

"You said these things before; you didn't mean them." Her voice was growing louder, drawing attention. He had to say something, make her angry enough to let him leave.

"Maybe I did mean those things before, maybe I never loved you, maybe I was just using you for that power you have," he could see in her eyes that the words had their intended effect. "I have more fondness for Finn than I do for you. You mean nothing to me."

Tears flooded her cheeks, the devastation from his words nearly palpable. He had the sudden urge to take it all back and spend the rest of his life becoming the man she thought he was. But he knew he would disappoint her. "Ben...no. I know you. You have no idea what we've been through. Please don't say that, don't do this. You're breaking my heart."

"Stop calling me Ben. My name is Kylo Ren," he said coldly, ignoring the feeling inside that begged him to stop. She gasped and stepped away from him. The fear and hatred pierced through the love in her eyes. That did it. He had succeeded—he saw him as the monster. She hated him.

Her mouth opened—to confirm her hatred for him, to condemn him—but the words fell away as she stared behind him in horror. He turned.

The one in charge and another high-ranking official, along with several guards, were marching down the hall toward them. He had no doubt whom they were seeking. Kylo knew nothing about himself save for his name and that he had murdered his own father. He didn't need to know more to believe that he deserved whatever punishment was coming to him.

"Run, Ben," she breathed. The woman called Rey turned and protectively stood between Kylo and the approaching guards. Her hand moved to something silver on her belt, and though he had no idea what it was, he was not naïve. It was a weapon of some sort. And, by the look on the men's faces, a powerful one.

"Rey, save your fight for the trial. I'm doing everything I can for Ben, trust me, but you have to let
them do this," the one in charge said.

"I will never trust you, Poe," she sneered. "This is your fault." She unclipped the silver cylinder from her belt and the weapon burst to life. The hallway was lit with a brilliant purple light. Kylo didn't know what the weapon was or how it functioned. It looked to him like a double-sided sword burning with fiery purple flames. She raised the weapon threateningly, and the entire corridor froze to watch.

Only Finn moved through the motionless crowd that had gathered in the commotion, his hands raised non-threateningly. Kylo hoped she would listen to Finn, the last thing they needed was for her to end up in a cell with him. "What are you going to do, Rey?" Finn asked evenly. "How is this going to help Ben?"

"We are leaving, and no one here will stop us. I don't want to hurt any of you, especially you, Finn, but I am not losing him again!" she cried.

No, she cannot throw her life away for me. I won't let her.

Kylo stepped up behind her in her distraction and easily ripped the other cross-shaped weapon from her belt. As she faced him in horror, Kylo circled slowly until he stood between her and the guards. He raised the weapon to match her stance.

"You'll have to go through me," he said calmly, fidgeting with the trigger on the side until the weapon ignited. This one was the color of blood, and he nearly burned his hand with one of the two fiery blades that darted from the handle. The weapon was heavy, quivering unstably in his hand, and incredibly hot. But something about it was comfortingly familiar. "I won't let you do this; I won't willingly go with you. If you choose to fight them, you'll have to kill me first. I know you don't want that, so put down the...whatever that is."

"Then I will immobilize you like I did before!" she threatened.

"No, you won't," Poe said, raising a blaster-type weapon in her direction as he stepped up next to Kylo.

Finn stepped up on the other side of Kylo, also raising a weapon. "I'm sorry, Rey," he apologized. "I can't let you do this either. Listen to Ben."

"Ben, please," her voice was trembling, her eyes begging him. "Don't go this way. You can't trust them; these people wanted to kill you."

"I would rather die than go with you," he said dispassionately. It was true, in a sense. He would rather die than let her throw her life away for someone like him. He stepped toward her, and she nearly tripped over herself trying to back away from him. Fear flashed in her eyes; she was afraid of him.

"No, I won't kill you again," she groaned through gritted teeth. He was wrong. She wasn't afraid of him. She was afraid for him. She had risked her life for him, but she had also killed him. Was that why he had no memory? Was he just the reincarnated body of a man who had died?

"Then let them do their job," he whispered. "You can't just erase the things I did. I must pay for my crimes." She stared at him in shock for a moment, before the blades disappeared in the hilt. The other men lowered their blasters despite his weapon still glowing brightly between them.

Ben turned to the one she called Poe. "I will go willingly if the last ten minutes are forgotten. She is not to be charged with anything."
"Agreed," Poe said diplomatically. "You have my word." Kylo didn't know if the man's word was worth anything to him, but he chose to trust him—he had little choice. He slid his finger over the switch, and the crackling blade disappeared, casting the corridor into silence. The upper-ranking official who had accompanied Poe cleared his throat. He let the weapon fall to the floor. Something about the way it clattered was familiar, but as quickly as the flicker of recognition from a life past crossed his mind, it disappeared.

"Kylo Ren..." the official began.

"Ben Solo," Finn interjected, offering a supportive hand to the young woman.

"He prefers Kylo Ren," the woman spat back, ignoring her friend's offer. Her hands were clenched at her sides, her face pinched in seething anger. She would hate him for what he had done, but he was okay with that.

"Kylo Ren, you are hereby detained for the commission of heinous War Crimes against the New Republic and peaceful civilizations of the galaxy. Your charges, if you invoke your right to a trial, will be read as follows...."

"There is no need for them to relive the pain of my sins," he insisted. "I waive my right to a trial."

Everyone began shouting at once.

"No!" the woman screamed. "You can't!"

Finn grabbed him roughly by the arm. "You saved the galaxy, Ben; we can defend you. You don't remember the good you did. And you don't know what giving up will do to Rey, please."

"He has no memories; he does not have the reasonable mental faculties to waive his right," Poe insisted.

"I understand I have committed 'heinous war crimes,' and I know the difference between right and wrong," Ben said unwaveringly to Poe. "You think I'm a monster; I thought you would be on my side."

"This is about more than just you," Poe retorted sharply, eyes burning into his. He lowered his voice as he continued. "Think about your friends here. Think about Rey. If you waive your right, they will defer to the obligatory sentence."

"I am aware." Kylo turned toward the official, staring him in the eyes. "I am of sound mind, and I relinquish all rights to a trial. Take me to my cell. I will sign whatever waivers you need there."

"As you wish," the official drawled, eying Kylo hesitantly. It was clear that Kylo, in reality, did not reconcile with whatever nightmare the man had envisioned. "You will be confined to detention block D until your mandatory sentence has been enforced in three standard days."

He nodded, holding his wrists together in front of him for the binders. Tears flowed down the young woman's face as she watched them shackle him. He had the inexplicable urge to kiss her tears and tell her it would be all right. But he forcefully swallowed the compulsion, pulling the official away from the others. He was doing this for her. If she hated him, it would be easier for her.

She grabbed the official's arm, but Kylo refused to stop walking, dragging the official with him. She was relentless, hurrying to catch up to the quick pace set by his long strides. "What is the mandatory sentence?" she demanded.
"The admiral can inform you of mandatory imposed sentences," the official said in his polished accent.

"I didn't ask the admiral!" she screamed. "Please! I deserve to know!"

"Death!" Kylo shouted, stopping mid-stride. He turned to stare at her over his shoulder, collecting himself to a resigned but steady tone. "The mandatory sentence is death." He did not look back, but he knew she was no longer following them when the blastdoors slammed shut behind them.
Brief discussion of death

Threat with a lightsaber
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Rose rounded the corner of detention block D, finding Finn and Poe standing with two guards in front of cell 1138. A blue energy shield secured the only entrance to the cell—most likely a particle shield—on the off chance the thick transparasteel doors were breached. A red hue emanated from the inside the cell, and Rose surmised that the prisoner was also contained by a Force-suppressive ray shield. She had seen them once in a Force-sensitive cell at the base on D’Qar. The two heavily weaponized guards were merely a formality; escape was futile.

This was how they treated the man who saved them all?

Poe and Finn stood before the cell, heads bowed as they talked quietly. It must have been a heated discussion, because Poe was enunciating his words aggressively with his hands, and Finn was jabbing his finger into his friend's chest. Rose stepped up cheerfully, as though they weren't about to tear out each other's throats. "Well, I've got the clothes, but apparently the entire galaxy fell apart when I left. He's awake? Why is he in here? What did you two do?"

Her smile faded when Finn turned to look at her. His eyes were blood-shot and glassy. In her growing dread, she began to wonder why.

If they had to lock the former Supreme Leader away in a cell, he had to have become a danger to everyone else. She could only think of one reason why he would have become violent. "What happened?" she asked, fear tightening in her voice. "Where's Rey?"

Finn was still silent, staring into her eyes as if searching for the strength to speak. Poe seemed to understand her line of thinking and jumped in to assure her. "Rey is awake. She's fine." Finn turned to glare at him and Poe amended, "Well, there's nothing physically wrong with her. She'll be fine, once we figure out how to fix this."

"You could start fixing this by calling it off," Finn snapped angrily. Evidently, everything had fallen apart in the short time Rose had been gone.

"Call what off?"

"Tell her," Finn demanded. "Tell her the promise you broke."

"It's not that easy!" Poe said in exasperation before turning to reason with Rose. "Kylo...Ben...that guy in there has been arrested for war crimes against the New Republic. I told Finn I would help him escape before they arrested him, but he wouldn't cooperate. Now I have to convince the other council members to amend the sentence, even though Ben is adamant he won't fight the obligatory punishment."

Finn continued to prod Poe into telling her the truth, rather than saying it himself. "Tell her why."

"We talked to Ben when he woke up and..." Poe turned to Finn for assistance but was met with an icy stare. "He asked about his parents, so I told him he killed his father. He freaked out, and now he can't remember anything."

Rose narrowed her eyes. This was why she had insisted they not be left alone with the former Supreme Leader. "What do you mean 'can't remember anything?'"

Finn finally turned back to meet her imploring gaze. "He lost everything, Rose. He doesn't
remember any of it. Not who he is, or his family, or us, or the war, or...Rey. All he knows is he was a war criminal who killed his father. Now he is refusing to fight his sentence.

Rose couldn't bear looking at them, let alone speaking with them after how royally they screwed up. There was not a chance that she would allow the man her best friend nearly died to save to accept his sentence without a fight. She would fix it, with or without their help. "Open the doors, I'm going in there."

"Rose, it could be dangerous—"

She ignored her fiancé, focusing instead on the two men standing between her and the cell. "Let me in." The guards looked to Poe, who waved his hand in acquiescence. One moved to a control panel, and the transparasteel door opened as the particle shield blinked away. Rose stepped through the entryway to see the man who had singlehandedly affected all of their lives, for better and for worse.

Rose had barely stepped into the room before he asked, "Did you bring the waivers?" He was seated, his arms resting on his knees, hands loosely clasped together. His stare was fixed on the floor when he asked the question, but he could probably see her with the Force.

"For what?"

"My execution." Rose turned toward the two men on the other side of the particle shield. She mouthed execution in their direction with raised eyebrows. They nodded in return. Everything truly had fallen apart when she was gone. Those two would get an earful later, but she dragged her focus back to the man in front of her. Rey would be devastated if they killed him. Rose would have to change his mind, and, though she didn't know him well, she knew him better than he did, so it was worth a shot.

"Hi, Ben, my name is—"

"Kylo."

"Hi, Kylo, my name is Rose. I didn't bring waivers, but I brought new clothes and..." she rummaged through her bag, "fire-water. It was supposed to be to celebrate, but this seems like as good an occasion as any." Rose lifted the bottle to her lips and swallowed the tear-inducing liquid. She offered it to him with a nod, which he surprisingly accepted. After he lowered the bottle, grimacing from the taste, he finally looked in her direction. She took it as progress. "Do you remember me?"

He sighed dramatically. "Should I?"

"You saved my life," she offered, taking another sip before passing the bottle back to him. "We also saved the galaxy together, so I was hoping you might."

Her words had stolen his attention, at least. He was staring at her to discern her honesty, perhaps with his Force perception. She didn't know how it worked, if his abilities to read minds were affected by the containment field, but she did know that it was unnerving to be pinned by his heavy gaze. She wasn't certain how this man would react to his memory loss; he had once been a violent man, but she had to do this for her friend. "You're afraid of me," he said simply. "And I am no hero; I killed my father."

"Yep," she replied, popping the "p." She passed him the bottle again. He waited for her to add more, but when she didn't, he tipped the bottle back. When he was done, he wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and stared at her.
"Yes?" he said after a moment of silence. "As in, yes, you're afraid of me or, yes, I killed my father?"

"Both."

He laughed. It was surprising, but it seemed like progress. "At least someone around here is honest with me."

"My sister died fighting the organization you supported, so you weren't my favorite person in the galaxy before you turned," she admitted, already feeling the effects of the alcohol. She declined the bottle when he offered to pass it back to her. "I actually promised to introduce you to my electro-shock prod when this was all over."

"I turned?"

"Yeah, everyone thought you were just another evil warlord, hellbent on galactic domination, but you basically had a monster whispering in your head since you were a baby. For some reason, you turned your back on your family and followed that monster to become his apprentice in evil. Rey knows the story, but she never told us because she said it was your story to tell."

Kylo's eyes lowered to the floor. "Not anymore."

"I'm sure Rey would be more than happy to tell you the rest," she said, though she noticed his instant irritation at the mention of her friend. "Rey is the fiercest, most forgiving person I know. She saw the light in you when no one else could. Even though you were on opposite sides of the war, you fell in love, and you both hid it from everyone. You killed the monster to save her life, becoming the leader of said evil organization, but you cared more about protecting her from them than actual galactic domination. Eventually, you turned, destroyed the evil organization, and helped kill the monster who would have killed us all by sacrificing yourself."

Rose could tell the fire-water was beginning to affect him as well; the rigidity in his entire body began to relax. "You left out the part about me killing my father."

"That was before I knew you both, but—"

"You kidnapped Rey," a familiar voice said from the door. Rose turned to see both Finn and Poe inside the particle shield. "And Han and I went to rescue her. Your father confronted you on this elevated walkway. He tried to save you from the dark side, but you stabbed him with the red lightsaber you were holding earlier. Rey and I watched the whole thing. You found us in the snow. You almost killed me, but Rey defeated you. She gave you that scar," Finn said, gesturing to Kylo's face. "You had this weird bond thing where you could holoproject yourselves to each other, and I guess you were 'different' towards her than anyone else. I hated you, I wanted her to kill you, but she refused, even when it threatened her own life."

"By the end, Finn was making me promise him that I would help you escape from the punishment for your crimes. I hated you—I still don't like you—I tried to strategize every way I could think of to kill you, but when you actually died..." Poe cleared his throat, looking away. "If you don't want to live, fine, but you can't do this to Rey."

"I committed war crimes," Kylo answered emotionlessly. "I'm paying for them."

"You gave your life to save the galaxy once already," Rose said softly. "It doesn't change what you did, but what message does this send the galaxy if we kill you for doing the right thing and turning. We would all be dead if you hadn't. And sentences are also based upon the chance of you
reoffending. Do you feel like committing galactic domination again, Kylo?"

"No."

"Look—we all hated you, we all wanted you dead," Finn said, and Rose profoundly hoped her fiancé knew where he was going with that proclamation. "Doesn't it mean anything that we're the ones fighting to save your life now?"

"I suppose," Kylo said quietly, staring at the bottle.

"Then hold off on the waivers." Poe spoke casually, with a shrug of his shoulders, but she could see the desperation in his eyes. "Let me talk to the council. We have all the information; let us decide your fate."

Kylo was quiet, and Rose feared that she had lost the progress she had made with him. She wouldn't allow the Republic Systems Alliance to kill him. It would be awkward to drag the behemoth of a man onto a ship, kidnap him and leave him somewhere for Rey to find, but, Force help her, she would do it for her friend. When Kylo finally spoke, he sounded as drained as they all felt. "Fine, on one condition."

Poe smiled. "Name it."

"I don't want to see your friend again."

The entire room went silent. They all knew Rey would want them to make the deal to save his life, but every single one of them knew what his request would do to her. At least, every single one of them except the man who should know. The two men got up to leave, but Rose waited. Kylo offered her the bottle, but she shook her head. "You need it more than I do," she said gently, before standing to follow the men to the door. Just as she was about to leave, she turned to look at him. He was staring at the floor. "If you want to pay for what you've done, then after everything you've put Rey through, I think you owe it to her to at least hear her out." Before he could answer, she walked out of the room, shouting over her shoulder before the transparasteel doors shut, "Just think about it!"
Chapter End Notes

Brief discussion of execution

Characters consume alcohol
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Three days. Three days Kylo spent sitting on the bare cot, his elbows on his knees, staring at the wall. Rose would bring him things every day—new clothes, a holochess board, fire-water. She was kind...and honest. She called him Kylo, played chess with him, and talked to him about everything but his past. He was grateful for it. The other man, Finn, would sometimes stop by with her. The admiral was the least comfortable around him, but he stopped by once to let him know there had been a "stay of execution" until the council had decided Kylo's fate, as if it meant anything to him whether he lived or died.

Rose hadn't said anything more about the woman, Rey, after that first day, but he knew it was an unspoken question between them. Would he keep her out forever? He had been resolved to do it until he heard her break down in tears outside his cell. The guards had done their part, keeping her out as Kylo requested, but he could hear her screams nonetheless.

"Just let me see him!" she pleaded outside the transparasteel door. "I won't talk; please, just let me see him. I need to know that he's okay!" He heard her screams echo down the corridor as they dragged her away; he even heard the loud thuds as she did something to the guards. He heard the sirens as the entire block went on lockdown, followed by her relentlessly pounding on the cell door. Eventually, she tried to use her weapon to cut it down. Her friends were successful in calming her down before the other guards came.

No matter what she did, Kylo forced himself to never glance up. He couldn't stand to see her eyes searching his for someone who wasn't there. There was something that drew him to her, but there was also something visceral he felt about disappointing her. It tore him apart inside that he couldn't be the person they all wanted him to be, but after three days, he lost his resolve. If he didn't let her in—let her see for herself that Ben was gone—she would end up in a cell right next to him.

The next time Rose came into his cell, he told her he would speak with the woman her other friends couldn't stop talking about. "Rey is this...Rey did that...this reminds me of the time Rey did the same thing." It was never-ending, and the faster he could show her that he wasn't the man she thought he was, the better.

Within minutes, he heard the soft thud of boots running down the corridor. "I'm here to see Ben," he heard her say breathlessly. His throat tightened with a mixture of emotions. The young woman was breathing raggedly as she entered the cell. Clearly, she had run from wherever she had been when Rose told her. Kylo sat in much the same position he occupied every day since he awoke—on the edge of his bare cot, elbows resting on his knees, biding his time as he stared blankly at the wall.

"Thank you for seeing me," she finally said, her voice small.

He had no doubt she was on the verge of tears, but he refused to look up at her. "Thank your friends."

"I like that color on you," she said, and he stared down at the blue flightsuit he had been given. He was about to respond, but then she finished her thought. "All you ever wore before was black."

Kylo sighed. He was already looking forward to the moment she left. "I hate black."
"I don't know how to play Dejarik well, but I watched you play...before. Will you teach me?" Her words sounded like she was fake smiling as she spoke them. She stood before him now, dragging the small table with the Dejarik set between them.

"I didn't know how to play, either," he said with annoyance. "Rose taught me."

The determined young woman sat down in the chair across from him, and he stared out the viewport. He knew this wasn't her fault; there was likely a time the man he had once been would have craved to be in the room with her, but he was not that man. He was tired of her reminding him of that every chance she got. "Have any of your memories returned?"

Scratching the back of his head in agitation, he spoke to the table rather than to her. "No, nothing. The med droids say it likely never will. Whoever you're looking for is never coming back."

"Ben, you don't know th—"

"My name," he growled, "is Kylo."

She was quiet for several minutes. Her breathing picked up, and he recognized the sniffling for what it was. The guilt began eating away at him until he finally looked up at her. When their eyes met, she immediately began searching his. They both knew what she was looking for; they both knew what she wouldn't find. Her stare dropped away in disappointment. She wiped the tears from her face with trembling fingers. "How are you?" she asked in a way that made him wish for the thousandth time that he could remember her. He believed Ben quite possibly loved her once, because he could easily fall in love with her under different circumstances. Glancing out the viewport again, he bit back a sudden barrage of tears. "Do you need anything?" she asked. "You must feel so isolated in here."

"I enjoy the isolation," he murmured. "It's quiet."

"I can't stand how numb I feel with the Force suppression field." Her voice still quivered with emotion. "My head is already aching, and my body is fatigued from the absence of all the energy. I don't know how you can act like it doesn't bother you."

Kylo was tired and cold down to the bone in a way that he assumed was from the Bacta treatments, but he didn't feel the "absence" of anything. "It's okay, I'm fine."

She narrowed her eyes in what he assumed was disbelief, searching his stare again. "You must have forgotten what it was like out there...."

"It felt the same to me out there as in here," he sighed. "No headaches or fatigue. I don't feel what you feel."

"No, I'll show you. You have deep connections to the Force." She stood from the table, knocking over the chair in her haste. She moved for the door, and he thought for a moment she would leave. That was followed by guilt when he found himself relieved.

"Poe!" she shouted through the transparisteel door. "Turn off the ray shield! I need to test something!" He heard raised voices outside of the room. After a moment, the red hue to the room was extinguished. "Can you feel it?" she whispered, closing her eyes. "The Force. Can you feel it flooding into your veins...heightening your senses...it is your connection to the physical world around you. Breathe in the warm comfort of the light, but the darkness is never far away. Can you feel it? Can you feel the darkness hovering like a cloud around the edge of the light?"

Kylo felt nothing. When he didn't answer, she opened her eyes to find him. Either she finally
believed him, or she felt something with the powers she was talking about, because he could see her smile fade. "I can't feel your darkness," she said as she backed away slowly. "The bond is still gone, but I expected that. I can barely feel you in the Force. Your energy is...faint, no stronger than Finn's or Poe's or...any other lifeform who is not Force-sensitive."

The corner of his mouth pulled into a sympathetic smile. "Do you see now? I'm not him." Her back hit the particle shield barrier for a split second before it faded away, a strong hand grasping her arm as she fell. She straightened herself, ripping her arm from the man in charge. The doors were wide open; Kylo could have strolled out if he wanted to, but he wasn't certain he could stand. A wave of dizziness passed over him. He leaned forward on his knees, listening to their conversation instead.

"What happened?" The admiral demanded.

"It's gone, Poe." Her voice was hysterical. Even if the doors weren't open, Kylo would have heard her. "It's gone."

Poe seemed as confused as he was. "What's gone?"

"His sensitivity to the Force...the bond...it's all gone."

"He has no Force powers? Rey, do you know what this means?" Poe asked excitedly. Evidently, the admiral didn't share her disappointment. "Without the Force, he is little threat to the galaxy. It wouldn't be difficult to persuade the other generals to accept a...less permanent...punishment. Hell, four of the fifteen already voted for releasing him without prejudice. Only two were pushing for execution anyway. Without the Force and his memories, this is good for Kylo. He's basically a new man. We can save him, Rey."

"Why do you care what happens to him or not?!" she shouted. "None of this matters to you! You don't care that he's lost the Force! You don't care that he lost his memories! You don't care what any of this means to me! You wanted him dead!

Those were the last words Kylo heard before the floor tilted up toward him and he was surrounded by darkness.
Chapter End Notes

Brief discussion of execution
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story is 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
"What did they say?" Finn asked the moment the medbay doors opened to reveal their admiral. Poe was smiling; that had to count for something.

"It's done," Poe replied, smiling. "There will be leaks to several galactic holonews networks. They will broadcast the death of Kylo Ren in Republic Systems Alliance custody at oh-six-hundred Galactic Standard Time."

Finn exhaled slowly and nodded. "Rey's awake; I should go talk to her. I was just waiting to hear from you—"

"I'll talk to her," Poe said, ignoring the raised brow of his friend. "I owe her that."

Poe walked through another blastdoor into the quarantine unit. Nodding to a passing med droid, he swiped a badge and entered the first room on his left. Rey jumped up from her cot, medication lines still attached. The anger and disappointment on her face was clear, but he knew it wasn't enough for her to continue ignoring him. "Why am I here? I should be with Ben!"

"No," he sighed, "they won't allow you within ten meters of that room. Not until you finish three more doses over the next thirty-six hours—"

"But I'm not sick; Ben is!" Rey cried out in frustration as she fussed with entangled medical lines while attempting to step closer. Her glare found him again, and her eyes blazed. Her hands clenched in preparation for a fight.

The realization settled over him slowly. "Have they...not told you yet?"

Rey shook her head through tears. "No one has told me anything!"

Poe found a chair in the corner of the room and dragged it across from her. He sat down, rubbing his hands on his thighs before replying. "I know what's wrong with Ben and why you're here, but you have to promise to stay calm—"

"Poe..."

"Ben...has...the Blue Shadow Virus," he said. Rey shook her head as if she didn't understand, but she knew what he had done. He remembered the hatred in her voice when she called him a murderer. "And you're here because you're...the carrier."

"No, that's not possible," she whispered. Poe was quiet, his eyes on the floor. He knew all of this was his fault, and there was nothing he could say that would make her hate him less. "It can't be possible, the Bacta—"

"Hell, I thought it would, too," he interjected. "I had to run this operation from a medbay room for thirty-six hours when we first got here, because I drank the tea, too. I thought you'd be cured with the Bacta. But it's not a miracle cure, Rey; you know that. It can repair fractured bones, tissue and organ damage, even necrosis, but not infections or viruses—nothing bloodborne. It can treat the damage done but not the virus itself. Hell, the Bacta would have done nothing against the poison,
either. *You* saved him, Rey, whatever *you* did completely healed him, not the Bacta."

"And the moment I was within a meter of him again," she supplied, "*I* infected him."

Her eyes welled up with tears, and he wished he had sent Finn to her instead. Poe owed her the explanation, but Finn could have comforted her. He couldn't allow her to believe any of it was her fault. "Because of what I did," he said.

"Because of what *you* did," she repeated, her eyes meeting his. There was a fire burning in them that was unsettling. "I want you to get out of this room before I do what I promised myself I'd do if I ever saw you again, but first you'll tell me where Ben is."

"Rey," Poe sighed, shifting closer to the "security" button on the wall. "I told you; they won't let you within ten meters of that room."

"I have to save him!" she shouted, but she sounded more fearful than angry. "Then I'll leave this place forever, so he can be safe from me."

His smile was gentle. "You don't have to save him, not this time. You just have to stay here, finish three more doses over the next thirty-six hours, and then we can work on the memory issues. There's got to be a way—"

"We?" Her face was pinched in contempt until the implication his words settled in. "Doses of what?"

"Reeksa root—it's the antidote."

Rey was quiet for a moment before she allowed herself to drop onto her medbay cot again. "If it has an antidote, why didn't they have one on Kamino?"

"*They did,*" he answered quietly. Poe had made many decisions he wished he could take back—trusting the Hutts, distrusting Rey, and using his friends as bait for the First Order were three of the major ones. They had been easy decisions to make at the time, because his actions were ultimately in the name of good. He was trying to prevent slavery, suffering, and galactic mass-murder like another Hosnian Prime. He was trying to *stop* evil, and he decided if he had to make some sacrifices to win a war, to save what his parents had fought to save, then it was worth it. He had been willing to die for it, nothing else had mattered. But what he did on Kamino plagued him more than he had expected. He had convinced himself that the clones were brainwashed, genetically dehumanized weapons, but he couldn't stop thinking about that young clone and whether there had been more clones that were similar. When he spoke again, his voice was heavier than before. "*This is* the antidote from Kamino."

Rey was standing again, panicked, which was something he hadn't anticipated. "And they just left it out for you to find? Did you ever stop to consider that it could be poison; they could have *wanted* you to find it?"

"No, I had no idea it was there. Somehow, the clone knew where it was" Poe answered calmly, hoping it would help placate Rey before she ripped the medical lines out and had to start over again. "And don't worry, I took the antidote first, and I'm not dead, so it's safe."

Her eyes narrowed in further distrust. "What clone?"

"A child," he said, growing impatient. "Look, that's a story for another time. I took the antidote with me, I saved it in case I needed it, and—"
"—and then you tried to kill Ben by infecting me with the vial I gave you," she finished for him. It was the truth, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt.

"And I'm trying to make it right, Rey. I'm using the antidote to save him."

"Why did you keep it?" she demanded, gesturing with her hand and nearly knocking out the medical lines. He jumped up to help her, but she fixed him with a reproachful stare. Poe got the message loud and clear—if he came any closer, she couldn't ensure he would walk out of that room alive. "If you wanted him dead, why not destroy the only serum that could save him?"

Poe sighed. His capacity and willingness to endure her wrath was wearing thin. "Yes, I wanted him dead. Yes, I used you to do it. I did it to end the war, the only way I thought I could—"

"You should have listened to me!"

"You were keeping secrets from me; I couldn't trust you!" he shouted. Rey already hated him; what did he care if she hated him more? Yes, she had cause to be angry. However, Poe resented that she had forgiven Kylo for the heinous crimes he had committed but made her supposed friend out to be the only one with evil intentions. "Ben would understand this—being a leader during a war means that you are responsible for more than just...telling people what to do. It's more than jumping in a cockpit and blowing something up. It's more than one person. My responsibility was to the lives of everyone in the Resistance and everyone we were fighting to protect in the galaxy. It was more than your life or my life or his. Even his mother knew that. If it came down to it, she would have chosen the lives of the people who depended on her over him. No one knows what the 'right' decision will be. Being a leader means making tough decisions by going with your gut, because that's the only way you can live with the consequences afterward. A good leader regrets the way things turned out, but not the decisions they made."

Rey parted her lips to argue, but he raised his hand so she would allow him to finish. "His mother, his uncle, his own father couldn't turn him. I had no reason to believe he would turn. I made the decision I did to end the war, because that was the most valuable move I had. We were up against the entire First Order with little hope of winning. But that gave us the hope we needed. Was it wrong? If he had died...we would have lost. But I can't regret decisions made without the privilege of hindsight. As consequential as that decision could have been, I still stand by it, because it was my best option at the time. If you could ask Ben if he still stands by the decisions he made on Crait, I think his answer would surprise you. I'm sorry that I used you, but I didn't do it to hurt you. Everything I did was with the best intentions. Even now."

They both stared silently as his words settled between them. He couldn't regret them; they were the truth. Rey, however, would hear none of it. "The end doesn't justify the means, Poe."

"Funny enough, one of the other generals on the council just told me the same thing, but about Ben," he answered, with more indignation in his voice than he had intended. "I disagree."

Rey collapsed to her cot again and stared at the floor. When she spoke again, her voice was soft. "Which would you choose if you were him?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're all about decisions and choices," she said, her voice laden with tears. "If you faced death by virus or death by execution, which would you choose?"

"Execution," Poe replied without hesitation. "But Ben is not facing death, Rey. We have the antidote, and the council has elected a stay of execution."
For the first time, the contempt faded from her eyes, leaving only the tears. Rey covered her mouth with her palm to suppress a sob. "Did he...accept it?"

There was a chair across from her that Poe wanted to drag closer to her so he could comfort her, but he respected that she had drawn a line in the room and didn't want him there. He sat down where he was instead. "He's still...asleep, but before this happened Rose convinced him to sign an admission that would accept the sentence determined by the council."

"What is the sentence? Life imprisonment?" She wasn't looking at him, but he knew she was crying.

"If he wakes without his memories or the Force, I doubt it," he said. Poe wished he could promise Rey that he would keep the man she loved out of prison, but the very least he could promise her was that he would never stop fighting for it. He would have told Rey as much if he thought it would mean anything to her. "Ben was critical in the fall of the First Order. I also may have implied that he was a 'double agent' for the Resistance since Crait. That doesn't mean he gets to walk away without consequences, due to the severity of his crimes, but it won't be death or his entire life spent in a cell."

"He's safe?" she asked, her voice small. Poe smiled carefully and nodded. "As long as he doesn't get his memories back." The rest of her words went unspoken, but they both heard them anyway. As long as he doesn't remember you.

Poe knew it was time to deliver the news, and he wished more than anything that he didn't have to do it. He cleared his throat, clasping his hands together. "Rey, there's a decision that needs to be made, and the council has allowed me to leave that to you." He bit his lip nervously, forcing himself to say the words as she stared at him unsuspectingly. "Lando brought in the best doctors and medtechs from Coruscant. They believe that Ben's memory loss could have been related to the virus, because there's no other medical reason he shouldn't remember. The med droids are willing to do a shock-therapy treatment, along with another round of Bacta, and they believe Ben could have his memories back. They would want to do the treatment while he is still receiving the antidote, so the decision would have to be made soon. However—and this is an important 'however,' Rey—the council would reevaluate his sentence if he regains his memories. I can't hide those procedures from them. And I can't promise that life imprisonment, or even death, wouldn't be back on the table. You don't have to make the decision now, if you need more time—"

"No!" she said hastily, then lowered her voice. "No, thank you, Poe, but I don't need any more time. Do you give me your word that he will have the chance to live as long as he doesn't regain his memories?"

Poe didn't know what his word meant to her anymore, but he knew she had the Force. He had no doubt she could sense his sincerity. "I promise, Rey."

Rey blinked through tears and nodded. "Then my final decision is to not do the procedure. I want him to live; nothing else matters."

"I'm sorry, the council sees him as less of a threat that way," Poe added as if it gave her any consolation.

Rey was nodding repetitively, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "Why did they change their minds?"

"The council is made up of fifteen generals who fought with us across the galaxy to take down the
First Order fleet. There was no one else to convince, because we decided that if the rest of the galaxy refused to join the fight, then they had no say in Ben's fate. Without his memory, it didn't take much convincing for the generals to agree that it would be cruel to take the life of someone who didn't remember the crimes he had committed. Despite his crimes, every general in that room would have been dead if Ben hadn't gone back to the Finalizer. The entire galaxy is indebted to him, though most will never know. His heroic sacrifices, coupled with him no longer having the Force, made the argument that he was unlikely to re-offend relatively simple to accept. They wouldn't let him walk away consequence-free, but, once we were on the same page, execution was off the table for all of them."

"You fought to spare his life?" she asked, and Poe swore there a flicker of something other than contempt in her eyes. "I thought you hated him."

Poe shifted uncomfortably in his chair. His complicated feelings of obligation toward the man who tortured him was not something he cared to discuss with her. "I do owe him for what he did out there, but this isn't just about him."

"It's not?"

"I made a promise to his mother before she died. And I made a promise to Finn after the First Order was defeated. And most of all, I owe it to you, Rey. I know you hate me for what I did, and I'm not doing this to earn your forgiveness. I'm just trying to make it right the only way I can." He held her stare for a moment before slapping his knees and rising to his feet. "Anyway, I should probably go check on him."

Before she could say anything else, he stepped through the blastdoor, and his weary presence in the room was replaced by Finn and Rose, who had been waiting impatiently outside the door. He watched them for a minute from the outside. Unable to hold it together any longer, Rey broke down into tears as her friends wrapped her in their arms. Poe smiled wanly and walked down the corridor to find Kylo.
Broken Bonds

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
The moment she was cleared to leave quarantine, Rey found Kylo's private room in the medbay. She watched him through the viewport for a moment, working up the nerve to walk inside. Kylo sat in a chair facing the large viewport, staring out at the stars. His hair was wet, curling at the ends, dripping onto the plain, blue medbay-issued clothes that were surprisingly loose on a man his size. Sitting hunched over, lost in thought, he looked younger than she had ever seen him. She would be content, she thought, just watching his chest rise and fall. They didn't need his memories; they had the rest of their lives, and they could make new ones. Eventually, she could give him her memories—through the Force—and then he would know how much they loved each other. They had eternity to figure it out.

All that matters is he's alive.

She adjusted her clothes that were perfectly presentable, delaying as long as she could. It seemed absurd to fear the man she had nearly lost forever—the man she grieved—but what if he blamed her for infecting him with the virus? Or, worse, what if he blamed her for saving him? She didn't know what to expect from a man who had been willing to die to escape her, but she imagined it would be more like a confrontation with Kylo when they first met. It would take some work, but he would come around, just as he had before. *He's Ben.* He loved her, and she loved him...and that was all that mattered. She had been given the chance that few others had been given; she wouldn't waste it.

With more courage than it took to face Sidious, Rey walked through the blastdoor into the room. Kylo didn't turn to greet her. She would have assumed he was watching her in the Force, but she had to remind herself that his sensitivity was gone. She had to remind herself this wasn't the man she once knew. "What are you looking for?" she asked softly.

"I'm not looking," he answered. "I'm waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

He shrugged, looking everywhere but at her. It was difficult for her to contain the hurt at his disinterest. *Why won't you look at me?!* It was something she had rarely experienced with her bondmate. His eyes were nearly always on her, pinning her in place, stripping away her defenses in search of the truth. And in his study of her, he would reveal his own truth. Now Kylo revealed nothing to her, hiding his emotions away in his guarded eyes. *Why?*

Rey took a steadying breath, reminding herself to be patient. She sat down opposite him and stared out at the stars as he did. The last time she had taken the time to study the stars, he had been lying dead on the floor next to her. This may not have been what she wanted, but in that escape shuttle, she would have given anything for this chance. *He's alive; that's all that matters,* she repeated to herself. She was good at waiting; she would wait for him to remember. "The stars aren't as bright here as they are on most worlds, but they do seem closer, don't they?"

"I wouldn't know," he answered, his piercing stare finding her as it always inevitably did. Only this time, the eyes staring back at her were unrecognizable. His eyes may have been the same shades of brown with flecks of gold, the shape familiar, but there was something missing—something that made him *Ben.* It was as if she were looking into the eyes of the man that Sidious had controlled, like a clone. Of everything she had feared, she hadn't anticipated this. She couldn't contain the gasp that escaped her throat. "What's wrong? You didn't see who you thought you'd see?" He turned away again, and she fought with everything in her not to react. She knew that was what he was
looking for. What she didn't understand was why. When he spoke next, his voice was so soft. She wasn't certain it was meant for her to hear. "Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"You used to look out at the stars before, too," she tried, turning back to the viewport to salvage any progress they had made in the moment.

"I don't remember." Kylo stared at his hands, lost in thought. At his darkest, Kylo had always been intrigued by her, even weathering her harsh words until she understood him. It hurt that he was trying to hide from her now. Rey tried to remind herself that his withdrawal inward had more to do with his struggle with identity than it did with her. But her deepest fear was that his new identity wouldn't have space for her—for who they were.

"Then we'll make new ones," she assured him.

She searched his stare for something beyond the cold detachment. She was rewarded with a growing resentment instead. "What if I don't want to?" he said cruelly.

"You're only saying that because you don't know what we had."

Kylo didn't respond. Instead, he hardened his jaw and turned toward the viewport. Often in their developing relationship, she had wondered if he hated her. There had been times she was certain of it. But never—not when she had kissed Poe, not after she had left him on the Supremacy, not even when she had almost killed him—had he treated her with such...apathy. Where was the man she loved? "Ask me something about your past, maybe it will help you understand."

He sighed dramatically. "Isn't that what the med droids have been doing day and night since I woke up?"

"It'll be different, because it's me," she said as her heart clenched painfully in her chest. *You're not alone. I understand you. I love you,* she craved to tell him. She settled for, "I know you."

The reminder seemed to only irritate him more, his hands clenching in fists by his side. "How well?"

Rey blinked. It was the first time he had shown interest in *anything* she had to say. It gave her hope, and as long as she had hope, she would fight. "How well do I know you?"

"You *don't* know me," he insisted. Rey thought they were back where they started, but then he added, "But how well did you think you knew him?"

She hated his insinuation that the love between them had been anything less than what she knew to be true. She couldn't help the sharp edge to her words as she spat, "As well as anyone could."

His brows raised dubiously. She wanted to smack the growing smirk off his lips. "Were you married?"

"Well, no," she answered hesitantly.

"Were you...intimate?"

*Yes,* she wanted to answer. *I knew his mind better than a lover could ever know a body.* But she knew that wasn't what he meant. "No."

"No?"
There was something about the inflection in his tone that provoked another sharp response. "We didn't have the chance yet."

Kylo took her words in stride, nodding as his stare returned to the viewport. "Were you friends, then?"

"No, it was a different love than that," she contended. If he would just let her in, let her show him how they felt for each other, maybe he would want that again. "I want to try something—"

He had no interest in allowing her to control the conversation. Though he looked at her like a stranger, there were still parts of him that were very much Ben. "How long did you know each other?" he asked with an air of boredom.

Rey's gaze dropped to her hands. "A few weeks."

"A few weeks...?" he asked, incredulous. Her heart broke further as he made their bond out to be something unworthy or inconsequential. "You were not married, you were not intimate, you were not friends, you barely knew each other, and yet you expect me to believe that you knew him better than anyone?" He turned to her with the same expression she had seen from her friends when they first discovered the bond and her feelings for Kylo. He was supposed to be the one person who understood.

"Yes," she answered with tears in her eyes, "because it's the truth."

Something in his demeanor changed when he saw the emotions in her eyes. There was something in his expression—not quite compassion, but the resentment had faded. "How did you even know each other?"

"Ben, that's not important—"

"Kylo," he corrected, "and that's not for you to decide. He was a murderer, a war criminal, so how did he convince you he loved you?"

"It would be easier to tell you our story," she offered, fearing what it would do to her heart if he rejected her further. "It could help you understand."

"I don't need to know the story; it doesn't matter," he said apathetically. She turned away and bit back a sob. It does matter, to me. It used to matter to you, too. "I want to know how you could believe your enemy, whom you had only just met, when he told you he loved you."

"We..." The first tear fell down her cheek, and she swiped it away. She couldn't allow this man to see her cry. "We were on opposite sides of a war, but we had a Force bond."

When she said those three words there was something almost like recognition in his stare, but it was gone as quickly as it appeared. "A Force bond?"

It was enough, however, to reignite the hope in her heart. She moved to kneel on the floor before him, forcing him to look at her. She reached for his hand in desperation. "Yes, the Force connected our souls. I knew you, Ben, better than you could ever know yourself."

"Then that's only more proof," he replied stubbornly, pulling his hand out of her reach.

"Proof of what?"

"That I'm not him," he insisted. There wasn't cruelty to his tone this time, as she had expected, but a
desperation that mirrored her own. "I wouldn't kill my father, I wouldn't wage war against the galaxy, I don't have the 'Force powers,' and I feel no...connection...to...you. Face it, I'm not the man you're looking for."

Rey shook her head through tears. "Don't say that; it isn't like that."

"Isn't it?"

"Do you have any idea what it would do to me if you left me?" she cried, desperate to make him understand so he would stop saying such hurtful things. Rey reached forward, close enough to hover her hand over his temple, and was surprised when he didn't lean away. Still, his eyes followed her movements with distrust. He wouldn't believe her, but she could show him. Jaina had implanted false memories in her mind, surely Rey could implant real ones.

*Can I share memories with someone who is without sensitivity to the Force?*

She remembered that Ben had tortured Poe in search of the map; if he could withdraw memories, then perhaps she could implant them. "Trust me," she whispered. "I'll show you." Instead of waiting for him to respond, she closed her eyes, connecting to the Force. She knew he wasn't supposed to remember, but she wouldn't tell anyone...and it was only one memory.

Without his guidance, she had difficulty focusing on one memory of their love to show him. Her mind kept returning to the memory that had haunted her dreams and the waking hours since she had awoken in the medbay—his death. Deciding it was better than nothing, she allowed it to play through in her mind. She pushed past his weak defenses and found the relatively empty cache of memories and dreams. Quickly sifting through the dreams, she was both relieved and disappointed. There was no evidence of the nightmares he had experienced before, but also no snippets of memories from his past. There was *nothing* of her. Reversing the flow of memories, she suspended her search and began sharing her own memory instead.

It began as he said his goodbye to Blue, telling him that he was perfect the way he was. Re-experiencing her emotions as she had knelt next to him on the escape craft, taking stock of his dire condition, left her heart in a confusing place. Her hand hovered just above his temple, yet she didn't feel him there with her like she felt him in her memory. With her eyes closed, it was as if she were with a stranger. The poisonous thought burrowed deep into her mind, refusing to fade. Why did it feel as if *Ben* was not the man sitting in that room with her? Why was his own presence not enough to contain the heartache of losing him? Why did she feel more of a connection to a memory than the real person trembling within her reach?

It was sickening that she found comfort in the memory of his death, but her soul felt the touch of his, and she felt more at peace than she had in days. He was there, staring at her, loving her, fighting to stay with her, even if it was only her memory. She had memorized every word they had said to each other—even the sounds and smells followed her into her nightmares—but it was reliving her own denial, her own naïve hope, that hurt the most. At least it did until certain exchanges began to take on a whole new meaning entirely.

"*You don't need me, Rey; you never have. You're the strongest person I know. You don't need anybody.*"

"*Then I want you!*"

"*I can see it in your eyes, Rey. You know the truth.*"

"*We can get you help. We can be together. You just have to hold on.*"
"I love you."

"That's why you can't leave me alone!"

"You're not alone. You'll never be alone, you hear me?"

"No, Ben, I have to try."

"Rey...it's over... you're still not letting go... just let go... let me go... it's too late... Please..."

"What would you have me do? Just give up?"

"One day you'll realize that it was easier this way. I don't want this to... I don't want this one moment to be what you remember. All I want you to remember when you think of me is my love for you. Nothing else matters; nothing else ever did. You don't even have to say goodbye; I know what is in your heart."

"You have to fight. For me. Please. If this had been me instead, you would be doing everything in your power to save me."

"I would have let you go, Rey."

"You are... the other half of my soul. The 'what ifs' would devastate me more than watching you die ever could. Stay here with me. Fight like I know you can."

"Why?"

"You love me. I love you. We're supposed to be together. You can come home if you just hold on!"

"I wish I could. I wish I could spend the rest of your life with you. But Rey, I need you to understand this. You saved me, you did, but I'm not coming home."

"If you die, you leave me alone with him."

"I'll be alive, but it won't be the man you saved. I would rather die like this than become someone who wasn't me anymore..."

"If you want to save me, you can't leave me."

"Forgive me, Rey. I love you, I'm so sorry. It destroys me to lose my connection to you. But I can't take that chance with your life, even if it means I never get to see you again. For once in your life, you finally have the chance to live. Do not throw away the chance of a long, happy life for me. We'll see each other again."

"I won't let you abandon me, too. Please don't do this. Don't go where I can't follow."

His last words rang suddenly hollow to her ears, as the words no longer focused on his loss to death, but his loss to his own mind. It was as if she were speaking to him about their current impasse. As the memory continued, all she could do was silently plead with him not to leave her with this stranger. She had done this to herself, of course; she had allowed doubt to seep into the memory.

The remainder of the memory—the crying, the screaming, the pleading, her fervent attempt at saving him—it was all relatively numbing, as nothing had truly changed. She was still lost without
him and fighting to bring him back to her. She allowed the memory to play out in its entirety, so she could show him just how profound his loss had been to her. The memory began to fade when the Rey of the past had begun to lose consciousness. She withdrew from his mind too quickly. Severing the connection jolted them both apart.

He immediately scrambled backward as far away from her as he could. The growing space between them filled with their labored breaths. "What was that?" he growled with a vehemence that chilled her to the bone; not because she hadn't heard that tone before, but because he had never used it toward her. "What did you do to me?"

"Nothing! I...I just wanted to show you...." She stood, reaching her hand out in comfort to him as he pressed himself against the wall, eyes wide in fear. He recoiled from her, moving down the wall toward the entrance of the room in fear, as if he didn't have the capability to take all their lives if he wanted. They both knew he wouldn't leave, but he had made it clear he was trying to put as much space between them as possible.

"Ben, don't do this."

"Stay out of my head with your...wizardry!" he shouted. His hands moved up to his hair, clenching tightly to the sides of his head. He was hyperventilating, and shaking, and it seemed completely contradictory to the lack of emotions from him she felt in the Force.

"I was trying to help—"

That was apparently the wrong thing to say. His face hardened into a sneer. "Get out."

Realizing they both needed time to sort through their feelings, she accepted a temporary defeat. Rey was a fighter, but she had learned that there was a time to fight with him, for him, and a time to walk away. "I'm leaving," she said as his jaw hardened when she stopped in front of him. It came out with more frustration than she had intended, but she was just that—frustrated. She was frustrated with him and his Skywalker stubbornness, frustrated with herself for believing it to be a good idea, frustrated with the Force for putting them in that situation. "I'm leaving, okay?" she repeated placatingly, raising her hands. "I was wrong for doing that to you; I'm sorry. I want to help you, I want to fix this, but I don't know what to do."

Her admission calmed him enough for him to straighten and drop his hands, but his eyes remained guarded as she searched them. They were still bereft of something that made him...him—the venerable soul that lay behind his intense stares, the flicker of recognition that she was more than nothing to him. He studied her right back, and the softness faded to something cold and bitter.

He chewed his lip as he looked away, as if he couldn't stand the sight of her. "Stop looking at me like that."

Rey stepped back defensively. "Like what?"

"Like I'm him," he sneered through gritted teeth.

In her own battle against her emotions, the words slipped before she could consider their consequence. "You are him."

He laughed. It was a hollow, sordid thing. "No, I don't know you, I'll never be the man you look at like that."

"Ben—"
"I'm not Ben!" he shouted, pushing off the wall and forcing her to step back.

"Yes, you are! You are Ben, the man I love, and nothing you say will change that. You can rename yourself and try to kill your past, but I know exactly who you are. I always have! No matter how much you shut me out or are cruel to me, nothing will change that! I'm not giving up on you, Ben Solo. I'm good at two things; fixing what's broken..." Upon hearing the word he growled in anger, slamming his palm loudly into the wall as he turned away from her. She waited for his breathing to slow before she continued, softly, "...and waiting. I waited my whole life for you, Ben; I'll wait the rest of it if I have to."

He pivoted back to face her at her assertion, his eyes wet and fierce. "Leave!"

"Fine," she said, backing out the door. "But I'll be back tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that. You can count on it."
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Three weeks. She had been in denial for three weeks that it would only take patience, that everyone else was wrong, that one day he would want her again. Rey didn't know what was worse: mourning Ben in an empty room or mourning him while staring at a man who looked just like him. It was worse than staring at a ghost or a holovideo or a picture, because at least there was familiarity, an impression left by the person she loved. This was a shell, a crude imitation.

Strong arms around her broke her reverie, and Rey turned in the embrace to lean her head on Finn's shoulder. Rey had been alone for most of her life. She had been starved for touch far more than she had for food. But it had never ached quite acutely as being warm in her best friend's arms as she watched the man she loved just behind the viewport, knowing he would never touch her like that. When Finn spoke, his voice was tender, but tired. "Rey, you know sitting here watching him isn't going to change anything. How long are you going to do this to yourself?"

"As long as it takes," she whispered. She knew his memories weren't coming back; he was safe as long as they didn't. But she hoped with time that he would give her a chance, that he would look at her the way he had when they first met—when they were still strangers. As time passed, she realized now more than ever that Ben had recognized her all along. Even at his darkest, he didn't stare at her with apathy like this man did. But she wouldn't give up, no matter how often her friends urged her. "Why does everyone else care?"

"Do you want the truth?" His words reminded her so much of her bondmate it stung. Just as Ben's words had been unsettling then, her body shivered in a visceral reaction to Finn's words now. Perhaps she feared the truth because, deep down, she already knew.

"No."

Finn guided Rey to a nearby chair, and she acquiesced to his silent request to sit. Finn lowered himself to a squat on the floor in front of her. Resting his hands on her knees, he waited until she met his stare. "As your best friend, I think it's time you hear it," he said firmly, but not unkindly. "How long did you waste waiting for your family? If Poe and I hadn't crashed on Jakku, you could still be there. I love you for the hope you have when all the rest of us see is darkness. But you're doing it again. You're waiting here for someone who is never coming back."

Rey wanted to run, but his hands on her knees held her hostage. The panic set in. She was acutely aware that he was forcing her to face a truth she wasn't ready to face. But then her mind supplied the helpful reminder that Ben just needs more time. Finn was trying to help, but couldn't he see that this was nothing like her parents? "How is this the same, Finn? I was waiting for people who were dead! They were not sitting in the room right in front of me—"

Finn's words were like a knife to her heart. "Is Ben?"

Her eyes raised to the viewport. She had no idea who the man on the other side was, but she knew it wasn't the man she loved. Not yet. "They didn't love me—"

"Does he?"

No.

This man had told her as much every time the words burst past her lips. I don't know you, he had reminded her. I'm not him. He's gone. She was tired of everyone—the med droids, Maz, Poe,
Rose, now Finn—telling her to give up on him. To give up on him was to give up on them.

Finn took her silence as an answer and continued. "It sucks," his voice cracked under the emotion, "a lot. It's not fair. But Ben died, Rey. You can spend the rest of your life sitting here torturing yourself, but one day you'll see that the man in there is a stranger, no matter who he looks like. Our memories make us who we are. He might look like him, but he has no more in common with Ben than any of the other people you'd meet in this galaxy."

Finn's words stung, but part of Rey knew he was right. She knew that what made him Ben wasn't his unique arrangement of features, but the combination of his energy in the Force, his experiences with his family, Luke and the other students at the temple, the creature who called himself Snoke, and their bond. She had seen how the man he had been in the past was nothing like the man she loved, and the Ben of the past had remembered her. Without the tormenting but unique set of experiences he suffered, he wouldn't have been the man she fell in love with. Finn spoke again, but she couldn't hear it over the howling inside her. It had become a familiarity over the past few weeks, the fear and anger growing louder than anything else.

"No, no, no! It's not true! I saved him! He has to come back to me! He promised!"

"But he can't be gone, Finn. He's right there." She could feel the disappointment in her friend, as whatever progress they thought they were making disappeared.

"Is he there? Is that man the one you fell in love with?" Finn shouted in frustration as he pulled Rey to her feet, gesturing inside the room. Her eyes wandered to the man seated there, whose unfamiliar eyes flickered to hers as if he had heard them. "You know the truth," Finn said softly, "and I can't let you do this to yourself anymore, because I love you, Rey. Ben loved you. What would Ben have thought about what you're doing to yourself?"

Rey hated to separate the desires of the man she fought to save from the man in the room before her. It separated them as people and made Finn's words more truthful. Ben had fought to help her see the truth about her family. Though his words were not always the kindest, they were honest. He made her face that the people she was waiting for were never coming back—not only because they were dead, but because the people she had imagined were a fantasy in the first place. She could only imagine what he would say now.

**Ben's gone. This man pushes you away like garbage, but you can't stop needing him. It's your greatest weakness; looking for Ben everywhere, in your dreams, now in a stranger.**

Was she looking for Ben in this stranger when he truly wasn't there? Was she only setting herself up for disappointment, or if she fought hard enough, as she had fought for him before when he had called himself Kylo, would he return to her?

**No, no you're still holding on! Let go!**

The words from the throne room, a lifetime ago, echoed in her mind. She had been so angry at Ben back then because he had not turned as she had hoped. He had broken her heart by staying, by calling her "nothing." Rey would give anything to go back there, suffer through it all, just to see him look at her like that again—like she was everything.

How had she not realized it then? Why had she been so focused on his words? Why hadn't she understood what he meant? Why didn't she focus on what he felt? This man didn't call her "nothing" now, but he looked at her as if she was. Every time she saw him, his indifference pierced her chest and tore another piece of her heart. Each visit was systematically destroying her. There were few tortures in the universe worse than death, and this was one of them. Sitting in proximity
to him, aching to touch his hair, his face, his hands...but knowing she couldn't. There was more than a galaxy separating them this time. He was more unreachable now than he had ever been with the First Order.

Since the moment she had tried to save him, her entire world was flipped upside down. Between Ben's death, the snippets of memories she had of the Cosmic Force, and the man in front of her who was everything Ben was and yet everything he wasn't, she didn't know what was reality and what was a dream anymore. Sleep at night only unraveled her sanity further. The nightmares of his death were constant. The smell of blood, the wheezing sounds as he gasped for breath, the moment his eyes lost focus and clouded over...it all haunted her, but those weren't the worst. It was the good dreams that left her sobbing for hours into the sheets.

In the first few moments after Rey woke every morning, before she remembered the waking hell her life had become, she believed the reality of the sweet dreams that she clung to long after the last remnants of sleep fell away. She imagined his arms were still wrapped around her, his warm lips pressed gently into her hair. It felt real. Then the haze of sleep would pass enough for her to reach for him and feel her fingers rest on emptiness, landing in a cold void on sheets that had clearly not been slept in. Then came the twisting realization in her gut, a sickening feeling sinking into her chest. All that she had blissfully forgotten would come crashing violently into her consciousness again. Her heartbreak was renewed every morning, but she craved for sleep every night all the same, in search of a moment when everything made sense again.

Perhaps she was stuck in a nightmare; nothing felt right. It was like an alternate, broken, hollow version of the life they were meant to live. The man she loved behaved like she was a stranger. He looked like him, but everything important about him was unrecognizable. Where was the man she knew like the other half of her soul?

As her mind returned to the present, as her stare returned to the remorseful but honest eyes of her best friend, and the truth was more difficult to ignore. Finn's hand found hers in support, as if he could sense the turn her thoughts had taken. Tears blurred the world around her into shapes and colors, but she knew the reality that awaited her there when the sorrow passed.

_How did we get here, Ben? How do I fix this when I can't feel you anymore?_

_Do you want to know the truth about your Ben, or have you always known? You've just hidden it away. You know the truth. Say it._

_Say it._

"Ben's gone."

The words formed without her permission. Her throat tightened to prevent another slip of truth. Was the man she knew and loved dead? Could the man who had fought hard against the darkness and still managed to save her along the way never come back to her?

"Yeah, he is," Finn whispered as he pulled her into a tight embrace.

Rey's stare returned to the man behind the viewport. He had the same twitch in his jaw, the same furrow in his brow, the same disarmingly captivating voice. He had the same hands, same nose, same dark wavy hair obscuring his ears, but he wasn't Ben. It was the eyes. She would never forget Ben's eyes. When she focused on the eyes, she didn't recognize him at all. These eyes reminded her of the man she faced on Mustafar, when his mind had been controlled by another. The part that made him _Ben_ was missing.
The longer she studied this man—his mannerisms, his words—the further the chasm between him and her Ben grew. She began to think of him as Jacen or Poe or Hux in this body, only pretending to be Ben. When she looked past the body, she realized she wanted nothing to do with him at all. He was a stranger who happened to look like the man she loved. It caused an awful wrenching in her chest. Closing her eyes, she relived the moments before his "death," just so she could see the love in his eyes again. A sob bubbled up in her throat.

Finn's strong arms squeezed her more tightly. The comfort of his touch was just another reminder that Ben should have been there holding her, too, rationalizing in that irritating way of his that she would give anything to hear again from his mind, in his voice, staring at his eyes. It would have been easier to accept that the man in that room was a crude imitation, an imposter, who stared at her more like an enemy than her bondmate ever had.

Her memories settled on the way Ben had held her, making her feel safe, loved, and wanted. She yearned for that man back, but no matter how much she screamed into the Force as Finn or Rose or both held her, there was no sign of him there. Ben had taken his last breath on the escape craft. As hard as she fought for him, as profoundly as she yearned for it be different, the truth was that Ben hadn't returned to her. Ben's body might have been sitting before her, his heart pounding away in his chest, but the glimpses of the soul she saw staring back at her through guarded, detached eyes was not him.

"Finn," she breathed, turning her face into the comfort of his shoulder. "Ben's never coming back, is he?"

Finn pulled away from her to look into her eyes, squeezing her shoulders in comfort as his stare revealed his reluctance to speak. He was quiet for a long moment, and Rey could almost feel him weighing the cost of his next words. "What if he doesn't? How long will you do this to yourself?"

He looked away, refusing to meet her eyes until he had finished. "How long will you do this to Kylo?"

_What do you mean, Kylo? He's alive. That's all that matters._

She wanted to say the words aloud, but they wouldn't come out. She had never stopped to consider what this man would want. To her, he was Ben, so he would want what she did; he just didn't know he did yet. Now she wasn't so certain.

"Kylo," Finn started, adjusting his grip on her shoulders as he swallowed hesitantly. "Kylo asked that you not visit anymore. He says you don't see who _he_ is, Rey. Even though you've stopped trying to convince him, he still hears it in the way you talk about Ben—how you compare them. You won't even use his name. He sees it every time you look for Ben in his eyes. He says you're looking for a ghost. And no matter what he does, he believes you will only ever see Ben. He says he's tried to be patient with you, tried to show you who he is. He doesn't believe you will ever see past who he looks like to know the man underneath. He wants to move on with his life, Rey, but he can't when we're all holding him back for your sake."

She could almost hear him repeat like a broken holorecording,

_My name is not Ben. Not anymore._

It was the truth. It was the honest truth. Finn hadn't said it to hurt her. Why did the truth have to be so painful? The despair that had been steadily building behind her eyes was released. She fell forward into Finn's shoulder, and he wrapped his arms around her again. It wasn't that Kylo wished
to no longer see her or that he wanted to move on with his life that upset her the most. She didn't blame him for that. In all the time she had spent with him, she had been so blinded by her own desires that she had caused them both to suffer.

*What have I done?*

She had been so focused on her own suffering and on bringing Ben back that she hadn't considered what it was doing to the man who called himself Kylo. In her mind, he was merely an empty vessel awaiting the return of Ben and his memories. In her selfishness, she had treated him as less of a person, someone not worthy to understand, because he wasn't who she wanted. His entire life, Ben had suffered through the same feelings of never being good enough, and now she was doing this to... *Kylo. His name is Kylo.*

Kylo had done nothing to deserve this treatment from her. He was just as much a victim of this fate as she was. As profoundly as she wanted her Ben back, that was clearly not who this man wanted to be. She couldn't destroy two people in the process; Ben wouldn't want that. She didn't want that for the man she had refused to know. The first sob shuddered through her body. She had been so strong for so long, but she finally let go.

"What have I done?" Her words were likely lost as she pressed her face against Finn. "What do I do now?" He wrapped her tighter in his arms, holding her up as her knees buckled under the weight of reality.

"Maybe," Finn sighed as her tears soaked into his shirt. "we start with baby steps. Maybe we start by getting to know Kylo?"
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
The blastdoor opened, and Kylo knew who it was without looking. For what it was worth, Ben was lucky to have earned her love, because she was fiercely loyal and determined. The stubborn woman always visited the same time every morning to deliver his meal. She would watch him eat as she barely touched her own. Either she was incredibly picky, or she didn't have a large appetite. Most days she would offer him her portion after he finished his. He always refused it—the woman looked gaunt, like she could use the meal—but she offered it anyway. There was something to be said about her obstinence. "May I come in, Kylo?"

He hadn't been sleeping well. He was irritated with the situation, and her, and he was prepared to answer with something sharp and dismissive along the lines of *that never stopped you before*, when he realized what name she had used. His eyes met hers as she handed him his meal. "You called me Kylo."

"You are..." she started, but paused, choosing her words carefully.

".... not the man you thought I was?" he finished.

She shook her head sadly. "I wanted you to be; I tried to make you him, but you're not. And that's...reality."

"You'll let me go?" he said, too eagerly. He caught her wince and tried to remind himself that this would take patience. Finn had talked about how difficult this separation would be for her; he had talked of lengths at the steps they were taking to give Kylo his freedom. It had taken longer than they had all expected, but this was progress. He could wait. He wanted to end the suffering, but he was acutely aware that the end of his torment would signal the beginning of hers. Or, at least, signal a new phase of her suffering. There was no denying the pain he caused her every time she saw him.

"What if...I wanted to get to know you instead?" she asked, wringing her hands. It was hopeful in a way it hadn't been since he had awoken in the medbay. When her eyes found his, they radiated hope as well. There was something about her eyes. They weren't familiar, exactly, but there was something that drew him to them all the same. It would have been so easy, he thought, to fall in love with this woman. Despite her assertions, he knew the problem was that she could never fall in love with him. She was still in love with someone else. He should have said as much, but that wasn't what came out.

"Why?"

It was the most meaningful question Kylo had ever asked her.

*Why? Why make this harder than it has to be?*

"I have never let anyone in like I did with you...with who you used to be," she answered. "We found belonging in each other before, because we understood each other in ways no one else could. We could do it again. Even the Force wanted us together; that is why we had a bond." Kylo closed his eyes in disappointment. She didn't really want to know him. She was still holding onto the past; she wouldn't let go of what had been. His anger focused on the idea that *the Force* was her excuse for refusing to let go, as if it was sentient in its prolonging of their suffering.

"The Force is a living thing now?"
She blinked as if she had forgotten who she was talking to. "It is the energy between all living things. Each being's energy is connected by a thread, and all those threads are connected in a grand design of fate that is hidden to us all. Though we are sensitive to it and can manipulate it, the Force still guides us to its will."

Kylo decided he hated the Force. Why would anyone want something to control them, to make their life choices for them? All he wanted was to be free. "And you think these immense cosmic connections of intelligent design care about what happens to us? Why would the Force connect us— you and me?"

"You and I," she corrected automatically, but there was something more than a pedantic obsession with grammar in her eyes. It was as if the words were a clue to something he wasn't quite grasping. Was this a typical remark Ben had made? Was it an inside joke? A memory? Disappointment shadowed her features, casting doubt over her fragile hope. When she spoke, her words were certain, but her tone was not. "Yes, I'll always believe that."

Kylo picked through the fruit to find his favorite striped purple fruit. She watched him intently, and he had that feeling again—like an experiment under observation. He found himself wondering if Ben liked that fruit, if Ben ate his food that way, if Ben had mentioned the fruit once and she was remembering his words. From the moment she walked into the room to the second she left, he analyzed every one of his words and action under that lens. "I don't believe in destiny," he said finally around a mouthful.

"Chance?" he said, not unkindly. "Luck?"

"We saw each other in our dreams years before we ever met." No, you and Ben saw each other in dreams, you never saw me: not awake and not in a dream. He had seen her. He had first started seeing her in dreams after she implanted those memories in his head, but they weren't even his memories. Kylo knew she had the best intentions in wanting to know him, but, just as quickly as she had said his name, she was reverting back to her connection with Ben. He had to change tactics.

"Say this thing exists," he said, lifting another piece of fruit to his lips. "If its design is hidden to us, how do you know what its intentions are? What if you're wrong? What if your connection was supposed to close on that shuttle? What if this is where your story is supposed to end?"

The young woman shook her head stubbornly. "It doesn't have to." Her eyes and tone were vehement. She reached out to touch him but stopped herself. "We could start over. It will be easier now, without the war." Despite her yearning for another man, there was a yes aching to scream from someplace deep inside him. He knew he wanted impossible things. She would always see the man she currently searched for in his eyes; her heart would always call for the man whose name was on her lips. And, no matter how much he wanted to be, he wasn't him. "Please," she begged, "I know I can love you. Give this a chance."

The problem was, she didn't, she couldn't, because she didn't know him. Yet he was certain that somewhere inside himself he could love her, too. There were flashes of her in his dreams with those eyes that reminded him of the sun, and he knew he could easily love her. That was why this had to end. He would only disappoint her, or, at the very least, always wonder if she actually loved him. He could never be Ben; he would always live in the shadow of that man. Something inside him told him he had lived in the shadows of great men before, and it had only led to suffering.
Logically, he knew they would both be miserable. He could end this and save them both the heartache. If he could only make her see, then he could set them both free.

Could he leave her, knowing now what it would do?

It was everything he desired, but he couldn't form the words. He searched for another piece of fruit instead but found he had eaten them all. There was a movement from her fingers, and a piece of fruit from her plate traveled through the air to his plate. It was impressive and slightly terrifying. If she could do that, if she could implant false memories in his head, what would she do when he told her the truth? He felt trapped.

The fear must have been written plainly on his face, because her brows furrowed in response. "What are you thinking about?" she asked.

Kylo set his food aside, meeting her stare. "Have you ever been in a place you couldn't leave, but you knew you couldn't stay?"

She studied him for a long moment and then nodded through tears. "Yes, I have."

Something had changed in her; he could almost feel it in the way the light dimmed in her eyes. The young woman had worn a façade, a mask of careful optimism and hope, though he knew she suffered underneath. She would often say empty platitudes, biting her tongue to force a smile or project unconcern for the consequences of their situation. For the first time, he felt she was finally being real with him. This was his chance. "What did you do?"

A shadow darkened her features, and he knew that, whatever she had endured, the wound was still raw. If he could just help her understand how he felt, perhaps she could understand what was best for them both. "I suffered there for years," she said, staring down at her hands. "I suffered there long after I left that place."

She stared up at him with something new in her eyes. Understanding. For the first time, he felt like she was truly seeing him. There was a hope that fluttered to life, delicate and fragile, but he knew the truth. Even if she saw him, even if she understood him, she would never want him. "How did you end this pain?" he asked softly, blinking away the build-up of weeks of conflicted emotions. "I'm being torn apart."

She wiped at her cheeks hastily as the tears began to fall and, not for the first time, he remembered how deeply she was suffering, too. "Someone helped me let go."

"I can't do this anymore," he said as his eyes searched hers in a desperate plea. He wanted her to see that she held the power over their freedom; she could give them peace. "Can you help me?"

Something about those words triggered a hiccupped sob to slip past her defenses.

"I'm trying," she whispered, but he wasn't certain he was supposed to hear it. Her eyes brimmed with conflict as she stared at him. "But I don't know how to help you. I don't know how he helped me. For too long, I hated him for the things he said. I thought he was cruel and indifferent and intentionally trying to hurt me. He forced me to face my denial, and then he just...listened and understood when I didn't find the answers I was looking for. He helped me admit the truth, but he also protected me from it. The entire truth was something I discovered later, after he tried his best to keep it from me. So I don't know what the right answer is."

"It was complicated." She huffed a humorless laugh, rolling her eyes as she wiped her nose. "I'm being torn apart."

Kylo didn't know what he was doing, what he could say to help them, but, for the first time, she was talking about Ben as a separate person. That had to be reason enough to continue this. "How
could lying to you help you let go?"

"He gave me a choice to remember," she said, words trembling with sorrow. "But I didn't; I wasn't ready to admit it. What I learned would have hurt me no matter how I learned it, but by doing what he did for me, he showed me that those people weren't worth holding onto. He showed me what real love was, because he carried the burden of that knowledge for me. He did it for no other reason than his belief that remembering would bring me pain. He carried the burden of that secret, endured my hatred, and when I asked him why, he told me, 'You made your choice; I only respected it. If you didn't want to remember, then I would let you forget.'"

Her eyes lowered to the floor after her last words. The meaning of those words and the silence settled over them. When she began to sob softly, he finally spoke. "Ben sounds like a good man."

"He really was," she cried, and he finally saw it in her—the acceptance. The fight, the love, and the denial in her eyes faded with her hope. He had seen the tremendous grief she had suffered in her memories; he had been briefly exposed to the hell she would endure. It was selfish to end his own suffering by leaving the burden with her. Part of him yearned to pretend to be the man she wanted him to be, but he knew that was no less selfish. It would have been easier for a little while, but he would only prolong the inevitable. There was nothing he could do to change that the man she loved was gone; there was nothing he could do to bring him back.

The kindest thing he could do was to leave, allow her the chance to grieve properly, even if he wished it could be different. But would she ever allow that? Even if she finally realized he wasn't Ben, would she ever allow herself to part with the last connection to him? One day, when the pain wasn't as raw, maybe she would. Until then, the least he could do was endure her tears. If it had been his place, he would have comforted her. Her eyes were focused on a strip of red fabric tied around her wrist. When she looked up, there was love in her eyes, but it was different. "You were right when you said you're not him. And I can't look at you and not see him, too. It's not fair to you. So maybe...remembering would only bring you pain, too. I know how I can help you, Kylo. I can carry that burden; I can let you forget. I can...let you go."

Tears blurred his vision. There was sorrow, yes, but he understood the tremendous gift she had given him. She had set him free, she had given him peace. She stood, wringing her hands as her eyes swept over every last centimeter of his face. "This...this will be harder than you will ever know. For me. But I promise you I won't come back here anymore."

"For what it's worth, I think I'm beginning to...understand," he murmured. "I'm sorry. I wish it could have ended differently."

She nodded, wiping her tears on the back of her hands. "Thank you...me too," she whispered, her sorrow making his own heart clench. When she stared into his eyes for the last time, she wasn't searching for someone else. "Goodbye, Kylo." The young woman's smile was sad, but he saw the acceptance in her eyes. She would let him go. When she had barely passed him, she stopped. "Here," she said, reaching into her satchel. Placing her hand over his, her skin just grazed his, and he shivered. She dropped two small, golden chance cubes into his palm. "Your father would want you to have them...for luck."

The blastdoor had already closed behind her when he whispered, "Rey?"
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Exile.

Ben was sentenced to exile. He repeated it over and over in his head until it didn't make sense anymore; not that it made sense in the first place. He had all but accepted that his fate would be delivered at the hands of an executioner. Never, in all his imaginings, did he think they would allow a man charged with war crimes to walk away. The list they read of his crimes carried on for minutes—and most of the crimes described were stomach-churning—but they had given him exile.

The council only agreed due to his loss of memories and the Force, but the circumstances mattered little when he was free. The concept was terrifying...but hopeful. On one hand, he felt peace in a way he hadn't since he had awoken, on the other...he was falling apart. He knew it had to be done, but actually going through with it?

There was no turning back; he was leaving. They were preparing his ship. He'd left a note for Rey. It was all but done. Still, it took all his resolve not to turn around and tell her goodbye in person. He knew if he did, she would never let him go. He knew if he did, he would never have the strength to leave. Yes, she had said she would let him go, but he knew this was different. This goodbye was more tangible.

Leaving the medbay, he turned right and followed the flashing signs to the offices. His last stop was with Poe Dameron, then he was gone, off to...he hadn't decided yet. He was a few offices away when he heard a shout down the corridor.

"Solo!" a voice behind him exclaimed. He turned slowly. It was surprising that his other name hadn't been shouted down the corridor. Whoever this was knew exactly who he was. He didn't recognize the face. The man exuded confidence, wealth, and power. Ben's hand instinctively went to his belt in search of a weapon. He was barely holding it together; only his resolve that he was doing the right thing provided him the strength to suppress it all until he reached the privacy of the Falcon. He didn't have the energy for the—true—words this man likely had for him.

"I am an old friend of General Solo, your father." Ben hardened his jaw, waiting for the inevitable scene. "He would be proud of your bravery and sacrifice, son." Ben narrowed his eyes, reviewing the words in his head to ensure he had heard him right. "What you did for this galaxy, singlehandedly, is nothing less than extraordinary. I understand you're a Jedi?"

Where is he going with this?

"It was not single-handedly, sir, and no, I'm not a Jedi; I'm not even Force-sensitive anymore," he replied respectfully, hoping that would be enough to end the conversation.

"Powerful and humble," the man said with saccharine flattery that Ben doubted was genuine. He doubted the man was even listening. He couldn't help the shiver of distrust that rolled down his spine. The man slapped him on the back, and Ben clenched his fists to restrain himself from striking him.

"I have a proposition for you to consider," the man continued. "As you know, we are in the infancy of building a new Republic. We need a strong army and fleet more than ever to thwart another opposing faction from rising. I could use a man like you commanding my new military."

Ben stared at him, waiting for a smile or a laugh or something signaling it was a joke. As far as he
could tell, the man looked serious. "Sir? I mean no disrespect, but do you have any idea who I am, and what I have done?"

"You have the infamy of Kylo Ren and the loyalty and courage of a Solo and an Organa. You know how these political factions work, and you can crush them before they become a threat. With your Jedi skills, no one would dare challenge you. Our military would be feared throughout the galaxy. It is time that the bad guys fear the good, don't you agree?" the man reasoned, his face devoid of emotion. Ben could feel the panic rise in his throat.

Are you insane?

"If you know I was Kylo Ren, then you should know that I have specific terms to my pardon," Ben replied, moving to step around the man. He couldn't feel the heady pulse of darkness that would have trickled through his system had he still been sensitive to the Force, but he knew it was there. Just because he couldn't feel its power any longer or wield it didn't mean it wasn't there. A hand wrapped around his arm, and his jaw clenched with the last of his restraint.

"Son, do you know who I am?" the man all but laughed. "Once the Senate is formed, that admiral will report to me. I am the law. If I want you to command my military, you will command my military. We need to prevent another Empire or First Order. We need the power of a Jedi." Ben searched the eyes of the unknown high-ranking official in front of him. Something felt familiar about him. He had to find out who this man was. Had he seen him before? Had he met him when he was young and his mother was a senator? He didn't like when someone knew more about him than he did them.

"Rey is a Jedi, she would be much more qualified than—"

"I don't want Rey," the man sneered. "I want you." There was something inside Ben that preened at the thought of being wanted after everything he'd done, and another part imagined the power he would possess. He would do what he had done before, but he would be fighting for the right side this time.

Still, there was a wrongness about it that wouldn't fade. He grasped onto that with desperation to focus his thoughts. "From my understanding, the Republic Systems Alliance is supposed to move toward individual planetary defenses rather than another Republic Command. Isn't your idea of a centrist military what inevitably led to both the rise of the Empire and the fall of the New Republic?"

"That question is exactly what makes you so unique. Your political mind, coupled with your superior knowledge of military command and battle is exactly why the Republic Systems Alliance needs you in a position of sovereign power. You would answer only to me, of course." The man obviously had first-hand knowledge of the ease with which he had formerly been seduced by power and influence. He could see the conniving deceit in the man's eyes.

You don't want a commanding officer; you want a rabid cur.

"I have no memories of—"

The man waved him off. "You're proving you certainly have something."

Ben stared at him, studying his eyes. The man exuded power and confidence. Clearly, he was not accustomed to being told "no." If he was higher up in Alliance command as Ben suspected, he must have been told about his loss of the memories and the Force, and yet... "You would put the former Supreme Leader of the First Order in command of your entire military?"
"Yes, for the good of the Republic Systems Alliance," the man replied dogmatically.

"Then..." Ben hesitated, weighing the consequences of his words. "I have little faith in your Republic Systems Alliance."

The man's dry laugh made Ben even more uncomfortable. "You have Solo and Skywalker blood in you, boy. Your mother was a senator, your father was a general, your grandfather was the most feared man in the galaxy. Yet you earned a legacy in your own right. You were born to do this."

"If you had asked me before, I'm sure I would have agreed with your assessment," he said, "But I'm sorry, sir; I can't."

"You can't?"

"I won't, sir."

"Do me a favor, Solo, and think about it. I think you will find that you cannot reject that side of you that demands relevance through superiority," he smiled arrogantly and walked past Ben down the corridor. Ben turned and watched him go, terrified that they had learned nothing. Poe Dameron stopped to greet the man as he made his way to his office. He was balancing three plates of food in his hands. Evidently, he had gone to the mess hall first after their discussion. Dameron was smiling when he approached until he noticed the fearful expression on Ben's face.

"I'm guessing you've been in there?" Dameron said, gesturing to the closed blastdoor with his chin.

"What?—no," he growled in frustration. "Who is that man you greeted just now?"

"After the fall of the Order, he's arguably the most powerful man in the galaxy." Dameron's laugh was less mirthful and more anxious. "He is insisting on reinstating the galactic Senate, because he aims to become First Senator."

"I would watch him if I were you," Ben warned, "He just offered me command of his entire military. He told me, and I quote, 'Once the Senate is formed, that admiral will report to me. I am the law. If I want you to command my military, you will command my military.'"

The admiral's eyes grew wide. "And you said?"

"That I have little faith in your new Alliance."

"I promise you," Dameron said, "I won't allow the Alliance to instate another powerful and corrupt Senate. I will never allow one person to hold power over the systems. Your mother taught me everything she knew, and she was right. If she could have, she would have stopped this long before the First Order formed. She couldn't, but I will. Even if I have to go into politics myself to make sure we do it right this time, you have my word that, as long as I'm alive, I won't allow another Empire or First Order to rise."

"I believe you," Ben replied, and he found that he meant it. Poe Dameron had learned from the best. He knew the stakes. He would fight to make the galaxy's systems independent yet strong in their shared alliance. He had no doubt his mother would be proud of the admiral.

"So," Dameron drawled, and there was something else twinkling in his eyes, something clandestine. "You haven't been through that door yet?"
Ben shook his head, trepidation tingling up his spine. "What's behind it?"

"I think it's easier if I show you."
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Rey should have been reeling from her decision. She felt empty and broken, but the pain had lessened since she made her decision. Even in her desperation to hold onto their love, she knew she couldn’t keep them both in a limbo of suffering. The truth was, and would always be, that she didn’t want Kylo. If she honestly believed it was only his memories that he had lost, she would have fought to make new ones with him. But Rey remembered something Dev had said in one of the portals in the World Between Worlds.

*No matter what your book says, Ben, to save a life would require a life. And even if it’s possible, unless you have part of his soul inside you from blood, bond, or healing, you will restore him in body only. It would require a power beyond all of us.*

*Restore him in body only.*

Maybe love wasn’t enough. Maybe she brought back his body, but not Ben. Rey had forgotten Ben once, but she had still felt drawn to him for reasons she couldn’t explain. Kylo didn’t. This man was like her parents. He didn’t trust her, he didn’t want her, he would never love her. Not like Ben did. She couldn’t hate him, he wasn’t a bad person, but he would never be hers. She had tried to see him once for who he was. Then she let him go. She wasn’t doing either of them favors by still holding on to a…

*Ghost.*

She had been grieving Ben since he closed his eyes on that shuttle, but the moment she got to know Kylo for the man he was, was the moment that she was forced to accept that Ben was never coming back. The moment she got to know Kylo for who he was, she knew it was only fair to let him go. She would watch over him, ensure that he was safe, and that would have to be enough. Seeing him alive, seeing him *happy,* it *would* be enough.

She expected to feel something, *anything,* with that initial realization, but the death of her hope was an oddly empty feeling. Admitting Ben would never come back shouldn’t have ended the tears, but for the first time in weeks, she felt nothing. It reminded her of the moment of peace when the dying had accepted that their breaths were numbered.

Hope was a tricky emotion. It was quite like the sun, she decided, both the giver of life and the facilitator of death. Sometimes it was the only thing that kept people going when the path was at its bleakest, but at other times, it sustained suffering so that people were stuck in a purgatory where they couldn’t move on. Every day she stepped into that room filled with hope, only for it to decay
inside her into a dark hole of disappointment. Maybe she was just thankful that particular brand of suffering – stripping her of her identity as much as it was stripping him of his – had finally come to an end.

“Rey?” Rose said, knocking as she waited outside the blastdoor.

Rey did her best to smile before pressing her hand over the door control. Rose walked inside and immediately wrapped Rey in an embrace. “I did it,” Rey whispered into her friend’s shoulder. There was surprisingly no emotion in her voice. “I let him go.”

Rose wrapped her tighter in the embrace. “I know. I’m so proud of you.”

“I don’t feel anything,” Rey admitted. “Is that wrong?”

“I don’t think anything you feel is wrong,” her friend said against her shoulder.

Rey was grateful Rose supported her as steadfastly as she had after Ben had died. It was different now. Part of it was easier because his heart still beat steadily in his chest. Most of it was far more complicated. She still grieved Ben, the love between them, and the future lost. Ben was still gone, only this time she had to see a walking imposter as a reminder of what she was missing. She knew there would come a time when she did feel something. It wasn’t until Rose stepped back with glistening eyes that Rey realized the universe had taken her words as a challenge. Judging by the pained expression on her friend’s face, the emptiness would fade sooner than anticipated.

“Rey, I have news for you,” Rose said softly. Her voice was strained and heavy with emotion. Rey knew that she had worked up the nerve to say those words. Whatever it was, it wasn’t good. Unease twisted in her gut. Her mind searched frantically for a reason, reminding her of everyone she cared for and what could have possibly befallen them. She remembered her friend had been working to fix Blue and feared the worst.

What if the damage was beyond repair? What if I killed him too?

“Is it Blue?” she asked. There was an immediate relief when Rose shook her head, but then the unease turned into dread. The only other news she was awaiting was from the council concerning Ben… Kylo’s fate. “Is it about the council’s decision?”
“Partly,” Rose said carefully. “The good news is – because he is no longer considered a threat without his memories or the Force – his prison sentence will be time served.”

Rey should have been relieved. He was safe. It was everything that she had wanted for him since the moment their hands touched on Acht-To. After she lost Ben, it only made sense to want it for Kylo. But if that was the only news, there wouldn’t be sorrow brimming in her friend’s eyes.

“And,” Rey swallowed the fear rising in her throat. “the bad news?”

Rose slowly exhaled, delaying the inevitable, as Rey’s heart pounded in her ears.

*Just tell me!*

Rose’s arms tightened around Rey. “They couldn’t let him walk away without punishment. They decided to exile him from the Alliance Systems.”

Exile.

Rey knew that had been the best-case scenario for him. It was what they had *all* been hoping for. But why would that be bad news? He was safe on Bespin, wasn’t he? Rey pulled away as her unease burst into terror. “Bespin isn’t under Alliance jurisdiction, is it? Surely, they’ll let him stay?” Even after letting him go, it hadn’t crossed her mind that she would lose him permanently. Lando was the only person left that he knew. There was nothing out there for him. He *couldn’t* leave, she wasn’t ready, she’d *never* be ready. The look in Rose’s eyes, however, told her everything she needed to know. “No, Rose, they can’t take him away from me! We have to appeal! Or I’ll go with him!”

“You let him go Re –”

“Not forever!” She felt the progress she had made slipping through her fingers. She had let him go, given him space, but this…

“Not away from me! I let him live his own life, unburdened by me! I can’t let him leave without me!”
A tear spilled down Rose’s cheek. She was shaking her head with a sympathetic pain in her eyes that Rey had only seen on the *Falcon* when Rey had considered whether or not to save Ben. She didn’t want to look into her friend’s eyes anymore. She wanted to walk away and pretend that she hadn’t seen the death of hope in them. Her heart was balanced in limbo again, only this time she felt the foreboding in the Force.

The shadow of sorrow further clouded her friend’s features. It was far worse than she imagined. “He’s already… he’s already gone, Rey.”

“No.” Though Rey denied it, she *knew* it was the truth. Hot tears bloomed at the corner of her eyes. Her lip quivered as she attempted to speak, but her words fell away with her hopes for the future. Rey clasped her hand over her mouth, shaking her head.

*It can’t be true. It can’t be!*

As if responding to her thoughts, Rose whispered, “he left on the *Falcon* a few minutes ago.”

“No.” Her head continued to shake back and forth, wildly, in an endless repetition. It was as if she could shake the words out of her mind, forget the path of despair that a few simple words had sentenced her to walk. Yes, sentenced. Kylo may have been sentenced to exile, but by leaving, he had sentenced her as well. “No,” she repeated, “he wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye.”

*Wouldn’t he?* the darkness within her mocked. *You’re nothing to him.*

Rey pushed past her friend out the blastdoor. There was the vague sound of her name being drowned out by the ringing in her ears, but she refused to turn around. She had told herself she wouldn’t go back to that cell, but she had to see him. She had to prove that Rose was *wrong.*

The weight of her misery must have been heavy in the Force around her, affecting even the non-Force-sensitives. At the very least her agony must have been evident on her face, because every sentient in her path stayed clear of her. As Rey stormed down the center of the corridors, people pressed themselves against the walls. Her hands were trembling as she entered the medbay, her sights set on the furthest room on the left.

Rey burst through the blastdoor, knowing what she would find, but her heart sank regardless. The room was empty save for a piece of paper on the cot – a handwritten note with the name *Rey* written on the front by a talented hand. She didn’t want to read it, but her feet carried her to the cot.
With trembling fingers, she opened it.

Rey,

By the time you see this, I will be gone. It might not seem like it now, but it’s better this way. I have been sentenced to exile from the Core Worlds with monitoring through a tracking implant. My uncle Lando has offered me a job, freighting supplies and aid to the worlds in the Outer Rim in the chaos created by withdrawing from the First Order. After what I’ve done, it only makes sense to start there. I won’t be alone, I’ll have the droid by my side. The last few hours have been a rocky start, but I think we’re becoming friends.

Thank you for letting me go. You did it to free me, but in doing so, you freed yourself. You can have whatever life you want now. You saved the galaxy, and me. I am alive, perhaps more than I ever was before; you don’t have to worry about me anymore. I hope this gives you a chance to just be you. You can build a life in Bespin, or travel the galaxy and see everything you’ve ever wanted to see. You have your family, now you can find your new purpose. My only hope is that you will find the happiness you deserve.

I know I am leaving without saying goodbye. I guess I was never any good at them anyway. Lando says I inherited that from my father. I know you let me go and I doubt you will ever want to see me again. If I am wrong, one year from today is my annual parole hearing. It’s more than I deserve, but I hope you’ll be there. Even if you only go with your new family to say goodbye, I will be waiting for you. I can only have hope that I’m doing the right thing. I know you believe that we still have a cosmic connection in the Force, trust in that. I know this will come as a surprise after our last conversation, but I trust in it, even if I can’t feel it. It’s all I can think about as I write this. If the Force wants our paths to cross again, then they will.

If these are the last words I will ever have the chance to say to you, then I want you to know this is the hardest thing I’ll ever have to do, but I’m doing it for you. I hope one day you can understand that.

May the Force be with you, always.

“You coward!” Rey screamed in anger. The first tear to the paper was accidental in her fury, but as she stared at the tear separating the words ‘better this way,’ she snapped. She pulled the two halves until it was separated entirely. Then she tore it again… and again… and again. Her screams echoed through the room as she tore the letter to pieces. “This wasn’t for me! If you cared about what I wanted, you wouldn’t have left me!”
His words of platitudes and empty promises made her sick. He didn’t care about her, he didn’t remember her. She had let him go so she could love him from afar. She planned to watch over him, make sure he was alright. Seeing him every day, even if they never spoke, was better than nothing. She thought with time… maybe they could be friends. But he left her. She might never see him again.

The anger and fear and heartache built up inside her until she couldn’t contain it. She screamed as the emotions exploded out into the Force like blasting an airlock in open space. The room was empty other than the cot, so the damage was minimal. A clinking against the wall caught her attention. Rey knelt next to the cot and manipulated the Force to guide the object to her hand. A box slid to her palm effortlessly. Stacked inside were several large bottles of liquid; two bottles were finished, and one was halfway gone. Eight others were left untouched. She turned one of the bottles over in her hands, running her fingers over the smooth, cool surface.

*Fire-water.*

Rey unscrewed the cap and sniffed it. She nearly gagged at the smell; her stomach rolled as she considered what it symbolized in her life. It was everything she hated. It was the reason why she was alone for nineteen years. Yet, her friends at the Resistance had told her that they drank to forget. Rey wanted to forget. Rey wanted to forget *him*. Steeling herself with her eyes shut tight, she tipped the opening to her lips and swallowed the liquid that had brought immeasurable pain to her life.

Now it would be her only salvation.

She coughed as the alcohol burned her throat, spilling some of the fire-water onto the floor and fragments of paper she had shredded. The ink began to bleed like the wound he had cleaved into her soul. The weight of what she had done in her anger finally struck her. That paper was her last connection to *him*.

Rey delicately gathered each torn piece with trembling fingers as she drank away the tears.
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See the end of the chapter for more notes
"Rey?" Rose called through the blastdoor. "Please."

Rey's heart was a black hole, sucking all her emotions into it until she felt numb. Dead. At first, the alcohol had numbed her pain. It was the only way she could find minimal amounts of sleep beyond the tormenting thoughts that plagued her. She drank until she didn't feel anything anymore. It was the only way to keep the old thoughts from Jakku from returning—the thoughts of inadequacy, of course, not denial. She should have thanked him; his letter left no room for denial. He left her because he wanted to. The alcohol numbed the wound he left behind until she felt nothing. Inevitably, there came a time when that wasn't enough. After the reality of him being gone for good set in, all she felt was numb. Empty. Then the alcohol was the only thing that made her feel alive.

"I told you to go away!" Rey wasn't certain they heard her. She had meant to shout it, but it came out as a intoxicated mumble.

"Rey open up!" Finn yelled from the other side. Rey groaned, realizing her friends had changed tactics, and both came to disturb her. Their presence was only another reminder that Kylo had left her. That was why they were there—poor little scavenger Rey had her heart broken by a family who feared her and a man who didn't care about her. What they didn't understand was, she wasn't sad. She didn't care. She felt nothing.

She picked up the bottle and swallowed the now-familiar liquid, waiting for the burn that would make her feel something. The darkness seeped through in her inebriated state, numbing everything else but the fire in her blood. The anger. Distantly, she knew Ben wanted her to fight the darkness. She didn't care what he wanted anymore. Whether or not he was Ben, he had still left her, like everyone eventually did. Her friends would leave her one day, too.

Rey wished they would just do it already. She didn't need anyone but herself and the bottle of fire-water. Like the darkness, it felt good. It made her stronger. It brought her to a place where she could drift in its caress, pretending her life wasn't in shambles. The darkness told her truths in the silence. It helped her see why she needed to keep her friends away, but they were irritatingly persistent.

"Rey!" Finn shouted again. He sounded both angry and scared. She wasn't in any danger. In fact, she felt better than she had in ages. She would be even better if they left her alone.

Force, you're over-dramatic. You should try some fire-water.

She finished the bottle after saluting the door with a toast. As the room spun around her, she allowed herself to fall back onto the cot. "I want to be alone!"

"It's been a week, and no one has seen you leave your room!" Finn's muffled voice replied. His tone was less angry this time, just exhausted. His words seemed to pull her from the darkness for a moment. Had it truly been a week? She nearly took pity on him and opened the door. She could almost imagine him leaning against his forearm as he pleaded with her through the wall between them. But couldn't he see? She was fine. If he cared about her, he should understand that this was what she wanted.

It was better this way.
"I don't care!" she slurred in her heavy inebriation.

There was a loud banging sound against the door, and Rey assumed Finn had hit or kicked it in frustration. He had done that during his last two attempts, too. She heard his muted curses through the door. It was Rose's calm voice that next floated through the door. "We're not going away!"

"Well, I'm not opening the door!" she shouted back. The bottle slipped from her hands and crashed to the floor as she gestured wildly. She giggled as it shattered, the sound echoing through the room loudly. There was no doubt in her mind that her friends heard it. She curled to her side and closed her eyes, shutting out the world.

The voices were faint as they spoke between themselves for a moment, but she caught the last demand. "Do it."

Vaguely, she recognized the hiss of the door opening and several voices in the room. She shut her eyes tighter, hoping they would go away. The crunch of the shattered pieces of the fire-water bottle under several pairs of boots was a sign she wouldn't get her wish.

"Holy Hell," someone cursed. She assumed it was Poe. This was all his fault. If she had a bottle to throw at him, she would have, but the box was out of reach, and she didn't want to open her eyes. "It's alcohol."

Finn sounded wounded when he asked, "Rey, are you drunk?"

Rey couldn't help it; she laughed. She rolled over, finding Rose, Finn, Poe, Maz, and Lando in her room. She barely knew the latter. Why would he care that she had shut herself inside the room for however long they said she had? Sitting up, she nearly fell over in her intoxicated haze. That elicited another round of giggles. When she finally got her bearings—with a little assistance from the Force—she looked up to find five very serious faces. Her humor succumbed to a growing anger. She rolled her eyes. Couldn't they see?—it's better this way.

"Why do you care?" she snapped at her friend. "You gave Kylo alcohol so he could forget me; why can't I have it to forget him?"

Finn stared at her in shock, looking at her as if she were a stranger. "Because the Rey I know would never touch the stuff after her parents—"

"Left me? Everyone leaves me. Why don't you just leave me like he did," she spat. The tears returned, unbidden. She needed more fire-water. She didn't want to feel alive anymore. They were dragging up emotions again. The alcohol could fix it. If she couldn't drink to feel alive anymore, then she would drink until she felt numb again. No matter her problems, it would fix them. In its absence, the darkness sufficed.

Rose crossed the room over the broken shards and sat next to her on the cot. A callused, feminine hand intertwined with hers. "He didn't leave forever, Rey. In a year, you can—"

"I don't want to see him ever again!" Ripping her hand away from her friend, she wiped at the tears that she had spent days suppressing. The words he wrote echoed endlessly in his voice in her head. It hurt too much to remember. Why couldn't they have just left her alone? "I hate him," she whispered, with less conviction.

Rose shook her head. "I don't believe that."

"Maybe we should send him a holomessage," Lando whispered to Maz, evidently believing Rey couldn't hear him. "Look at her. He should know what this has—"
"He can't help her," Maz replied, eyes fixed on Rey's instead of the man she was speaking with. "This is her battle to fight."

"Then let me fight it alone." Rey stared back at the older woman with disdain. "Get out."

"Rey, we're not leaving you," Finn promised. "I'd never leave you."

"You will," she said, because she knew they all would. The fear that she would end up alone again, as she had been on Jakku, was never far from her mind. "You'll get married and start a life together, and then where will I be? Alone."

"Even if we're not in the same star system, we'll still have comlinks and holoprojectors. You'll never be alone, Rey." Finn couldn't have known. He couldn't have known what hearing those words from anyone other than the man she loved would do to her. You're not alone, he had told her, but he'd left her. It's better this way.

"I am alone!"

Standing was more difficult than she had anticipated. Rey swayed precariously as the world tilted under her feet. Finn caught her arm to steady her, but she ripped it away in agitation. Unfortunately, the momentum sent her sprawling against the table. A bottle of fire-water slipped off it, shattering on the floor. Rey stared Finn down resentfully. She flinched away when he reached for her. "Don't touch me!"

The look on his face could only be described as devastation. It broke through the cloud of darkness and inebriation that had held control over her. Her throat tightened as she reflected upon her treatment of her friend. She loved him. Part of her knew that this behavior wasn't her, that she needed to stop, but everything hurt. She turned back to the table and grabbed the last remaining bottle. Within seconds the opened bottle was at her lips, the burning liquid soothing the ache in her chest.

The lulling feeling was fleeting, however, because she had barely swallowed the third gulp before the bottle was ripped from her hands. Her throat seized from the unexpected change in pressure, and she coughed up the remaining liquid. Before she could utter a single word in irritation, she noticed Poe was walking away to the refresher...with the bottle of fire-water in his hand. Rey attempted to give chase, but her feet did not respond the way she wanted them to. The Force was little help, either; it slipped through her fingers before she could manipulate it.

By the time she had stumbled into the refresher, Poe was emptying the contents of the bottle into the sink. "Stop!" she screamed, struggling with him for control over the bottle. Poe, however, held steadfast in his determination. By the time she wrenched the bottle from his grip, it was empty. Rey rounded on him in her anger.

"What have you done?!" With the strength of the powerful emotions churning inside her, she pushed him. Hard. He fell backward into the shower, the fire in his eyes mirroring the rage in her heart. He responded by jumping to his feet, throwing her over his shoulder, turning back to where he had fallen, and dropping her down in the shower, clothes and all. He pressed a button to turn it on. Rey realized belatedly that the shower was not sonic when the cold water hit her face.

He grabbed the pieced-together letter from where she had stuck it to the mirror with bonding tape. "Are you doing this for him?" he said over the spray of the water. "Is this what you think he wanted when he wrote this?"

"I don't care what he wants! He left me alone!" Rey spat as the water cascaded over her face. She
stared back at Poe defiantly, and her mind transported her back to a night on Ahch-To in the rain, when she stared down another man who had failed her—Luke. It was the night Ben had promised to never leave her alone. They had come a long way since that night, but he'd still broken his promise.

"No, he didn't!" Poe shouted back. "I get that you hate me, but we broke into your room to make sure you're okay. Finn, Rose, Maz, and Lando are out there right now, worried sick about you, even after you told them all to 'go away.' That's not alone, Rey."

Rey knew it was the truth, because she knew loneliness better than anyone else. These people cared enough not to listen to her. Somewhere, under the darkness and intoxication, Rey knew that. At the sound of their names, the others pushed into the room one by one.

Rey pulled her legs up and pressed her forehead to her knees. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Well, Fire-water and darkness has never been a particularly favorable combination, dear," Maz replied with levity.

"I wanted to forget," Rey murmured against her wet clothes, the cool temperature of the water soothing the burn of the alcohol.

"What's stopping you?" Maz said, as if it were that easy, as if she could just make a wish and...make herself forget. She had done it before; she had forgotten what she had done to her parents. She had used persuasion on herself to forget everything. Her powers were stronger than before; she had no doubt she could do it again.

If she tried hard enough, she could ensure that she only forgot him.

Rey wouldn't convince herself that he was coming back, as she had done for her family. There was no sense waiting indefinitely like she had before. She could convince herself he never existed in the first place. Or, perhaps, she could convince herself to only remember him as her enemy...or that she never loved him at all. It would be easy to be apart from him if she cared as little as he did. He didn't remember her, so why should she remember him? Her heartache would be gone. She wouldn't remember the pain of his death, or him leaving her, but she also wouldn't remember the fleeting love that had made her happier than she had ever been. She wouldn't remember...anything. That was what she wanted, wasn't it? To forget? Her eyes found the wise humanoid woman. "You can do it right now if you want to—forget everything that has ever caused you pain," Maz assured her.

Rey closed her eyes, imagining her life without Ben Solo in it. She imagined forgetting his voice, his piercing stare, his strength, his ferocity, his energy, his smell, his tears, his smile, or his laugh. She imagined forgetting the softness of his hand, the security of his embrace, or the warmth of his lips. She imagined forgetting the look of profound love in his eyes. The ache of remembering it all was excruciating, but imagining she forgot it all was a pain worse than death.

_I don't want to forget him._

"Go ahead," Maz pressed.

Rey shook her head, her wet hair sticking to her cheeks.

"Why not?"

"I want to remember Ben," she cried. "I love him." Shivering from the cold, Rey wrapped her arms around her legs tighter. Why was the one person she needed more than anyone else in that moment
the one person she couldn't have? After everything they had overcome, it wasn't fair. She wanted to drink, she wanted to surround herself with darkness, she wanted to be angry at the universe. But what did it change? Her suffering was borne from a place of love. And she didn't want to live an existence without that love, no matter how painful.

Maz took the letter from Poe's hand. "May I read this?" Rey nodded as the water mixed with the hot tears burning down her cheeks. The woman tutted and chuckled to herself but otherwise didn't comment until she finished it. "I was the one who helped show him the consequences if he stayed," she finally said, carefully setting the paper down. "It won't mean anything now, but he did this for both of you."

"Why?" Rey croaked.

Why would you tell him to leave me?

She felt betrayed. Maz had been the one who told her she would find belonging with Ben; she was the one to encourage her to face the truth—that she loved Ben, and he loved her in return. She had been the catalyst that had brought them together...and the one to tear them apart.

No, the Force tore you apart, something deep inside reminded her.

Maz hadn't pushed Ben Solo away, she had pushed Kylo Ren. Ben Solo was dead, no matter how deeply she refused to admit it. Part of Rey knew that, but it was a part the voice inside cried desperately not to listen to. Maz smiled, her eyes as knowing as ever. "Because what you both need, right now, you cannot find in each other. The immediate paths before you, you must walk alone. Trust in the Force to lead you in the right direction."

There was something about Maz that could easily crumble the denial and excuses she had built up around her until all that was left was the truth. Rey had told Kylo that she was letting him go, but she hadn't truly. She hadn't been forced to face the truth of it until he left. "The Force can't lead me where I want, Maz. I want him back...but he's gone," she whispered.

He's gone forever. The worst part of the letter isn't that he left; it's that I realized it doesn't matter if Kylo comes back. Ben is dead. He's really gone.

"You never answered what Poe asked before. What would Ben have wanted?" Maz asked, her sobering stare fixed on Rey. The truth must have been evident, because, when Rey opened her mouth to answer, Maz smiled and lifted her hand. "No need to tell me, dear, I can see it. You know the truth."

More than anything, she was certain of one truth: wherever he is, he wouldn't have wanted this.

Lando knelt beside Maz, leveling his gaze at Rey. "Drinking that stuff won't bring him back," he added. "It won't make you any less sad, either. It will just prolong your pain, trust me." Rey knew it was the truth. Everything they had said had been the truth. He stood up and adjusted his cape around his shoulders. "Have a good cry and get some rest, because tomorrow you start work in the hangar."

He raised his eyebrows, expecting a challenge, but Rey nodded in agreement, her heartache escaping down her cheeks. It should have seemed impossible—doing something other than struggle with the loss of Ben—but she found herself looking forward to focusing her energy somewhere else instead. It was something she knew how to do, and the familiarity of it gave her hope.
The pain and heartache returned full force as she imagined continuing her journey without Ben, and Rey didn't have the alcohol or darkness to grasp onto in that moment of overwhelming uncertainty. She was forced to face it. Rey wrapped her arms tighter around her knees and just...let go. Everything that had built up for weeks as she held hope that his memories would return was finally released like lowering a flood gate. Broken sobs tore from her throat without the restraint she had grasped onto before. Her pain echoed through the room around them. There were brief whispers that she couldn't direct enough energy to focus on, then Poe, Maz, and Lando took their leave.

She felt a warmth on her right and then left, arms wrapping around her back. She knew without looking that Rose and Finn had climbed into the shower to sit with her, clothes and all. Neither said a word; steadfast in their loyalty by her side even after how cruel and unfair she had been to them. They just held her in support, providing her the love she needed as she faced the truth.

Chapter End Notes

A character consumes alcohol and becomes aggressive toward other characters
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Rey knew she was asleep. She was standing by the lake—their lake—waiting for him as she did every night in her dreams. Every night except for the last week, of course; those nights had been spent dreamless in a drunken haze. It was the first night she was sober again, and part of her truly believed and hoped that he would be there. He had told her once that the lake was where she could always find him. But as it had been every night since they had awoken, he wasn't there. Though this night, as she sat staring out at the water and thinking of him, there was something different. She could hear music.

Rey turned from the sparkling stillness of the lake, looking up in the darkness to see a beautiful, crystalline building illuminated with colorful lights. Her feet carried her toward the building before she considered whether or not she should. Something was drawing her there.

As she drew nearer and the music grew louder, Rey began to hear a great number of voices. It was a party of some kind. Rey had never been to a party before. A beautiful crystal staircase led to the entry. She could almost hear someone calling her name. When she lifted her foot to take the first step, she noticed she was wearing a dress.

It was dark green, shimmering in the lights. The material reminded her of something she would have worn on Jakku, soft and delicate, though the material was pulled straight up into a halter rather than wrapped in a crisscross across her chest. It did, however, crisscross over her abdomen. The material gripped her waist tightly then flowed freely to her feet in soft pleats. A sparkling, translucent green train flowed from her back. The breeze picked up, and loose tendrils of hair tickled her cheeks, the skirt and train dancing around her as she climbed each step. Rey reached up to secure her hair, but it stayed in place. She ran her fingers over the twisted tresses and realized they were fashioned in an elaborate braid across the crown of her head and three braided buns in the back.

Lifting her dress, she ran up the last few steps. She felt like she was floating as her feet brought her closer to...what? What had brought her there? What would she find beyond the tall, arching doors that separated her from the party? Before she could lose her nerve, the doors opened, and she stepped inside.

As she walked into the grand, vaulted room, the world almost seemed to sharpen around her. The guest's faces were covered in intricate masquerade masks matching the wedding colors of greens, whites, and greys. They danced in the center of the room to a live band of various alien species. Floating lanterns bobbed in the air above them, casting the dancers in vibrant hues. Attendees not on the dance floor stood around fountains and buffets of food that could have fed her for an entire year. She considered spending the rest of her dream there, but she caught sight of a little boy dressed all in black, darting in between the guests. His dark curls bounced as he moved in and out of view. Something familiar about the boy caused her breath to catch.

*Ben?*

"Rey!"

She turned to find Rose in a beautiful white dress that darkened into a deep ombre green below her
knees. A delicate string of crystals wrapped around her waist. The top portion was designed similar
to Rey's dress, though Rose's dress had a beautiful sheer lace that ran the length of her arms. Her
hair was arranged in soft curls around her shoulders. The left side was braided loosely back behind
her ear, pinned in place by a sparkling green lace flower. Her white masquerade mask contained
the same green lace as the flower and crystals from the strand around her waist. Her smile lit up
the room, she was positively glowing. Rose grasped her crescent medallion around her neck,
ensuring her sister's memory was part of her special day.

It's their wedding day.

Her friend held another mask in her outstretched hand. "Where have you been, and would you
please put this back on?" Rose asked in hushed tones.

Rey took the proffered mask. It was almost entirely black with green accent feathers. She lifted it
to her face, tying the delicate strings around the back of her head. "Better?"

"Yes!" her friend squealed. "I can't believe I'm married!" As they embraced, Rey strategically
placed her arms around the bride in an attempt to avoid ruining her friend's hair. "Thank you, Rey,
for all your help. Everything is perfect. I love my hair, by the way. Finn is insisting on lessons."

"We'll see," Rey laughed. She had that feeling again, like she was following a script. "Where is
your husband?"

Rose's eyes went wide at the sound of the foreign word. "Husband. Finn is my husband."

Rey nodded with a smile, but her eyes were drawn back to the dance floor in search of the little
boy. "Do you feel...different?" she asked her friend as she scanned the crowd.

"Yes, but that's probably morning sickness." Rose gasped, covering her mouth. Rey turned back to
her friend with a furrowed brow. "Oh, meteors. Don't tell anyone yet."

"Don't tell anyone what?" Rey asked. She had no idea what morning sickness was. "Don't make me
go ask Finn. You know he'll cave."

Instead of answering, Rose grabbed some brown sweets—chocolate, somehow Rey knew it was
called chocolate—from the table next to her, shoving one in her mouth and one in Rey's. "Hey!"

"I'm pregnant."

"What!" Rey gasped around the food in her mouth.

"Shh, I just found out," Rose laughed. Her smile was the happiest Rey had ever seen. "Quick, can
you do some of that Jedi magic and tell me if it's a boy or a girl?"

Rey returned her smile. "It's a girl."

"What?" Rose asked around another bite of chocolate. "Did you do it?"

"I don't need to," she said with a shrug. "I just know."

Before Rey could blink, her friend was jumping—in heels and a dress—squealing in excitement.
"A girl! It's a girl! We said if it was a girl, we'd name her Paige."

Rey pulled her into another embrace as her heart soared. "I'm going to be Auntie!"

"Rose!" Finn scolded from behind her. "I thought we weren't going to tell anyone yet."
Then both turned to find Finn with a feigned look of irritation on his face. "It's just Rey!" Rose argued playfully.

"Thanks," she snorted and smiled at her best friend. "You look dashing, Finn." Rey opened her arms. Finn hesitated for a moment, eying her from head to toe with a brow raised before he wrapped her in a tight embrace.

"Thank you, Rey, especially since you're the one who picked it out," he said, releasing her from his grip. "And you," he flicked her nose with his finger, "are no longer soaking wet."

Before she could ask what in the Core Worlds he was talking about, Rose stepped forward to grasp his hands in hers. "Rey said it's a girl!"

"A girl?" Finn's eyes widened in shock, but he stepped forward and wrapped his wife in a tight embrace. "A girl."

"You're going to be a daddy!" Rey giggled excitedly. She knew Finn would be an amazing father, especially to a little girl. Finn adored the women in his life.

"Plan on holocalls at all hours of the night," he warned.

"I'm so happy for you both." Poe and another man with long, dark braids came bouncing up behind Finn, clapping him on the back. They both wore green-accented masks similar to the one Finn wore, only black where Finn's was white. Finn and the other man laughed about something as Poe lifted Rose and spun her around. They all seemed like good friends. Close. It made Rey smile to see that they were all so happy. Finn looked over at her as he engaged in conversation with the other man who had an accent similar to hers. She was happy to be a part of their happiness. She held up an invisible glass to mirror the flutes of a sparkling drink they held in their hands. "To Mr. and Mrs. Tico."

The others repeated her toast and drank to it, but her attention was stolen by movement in the crowd to her left. There was a flash of dark curls. She turned to search for the small boy but lost him behind a group of dancers. "Excuse me," she said, though her friends were already distracted by their conversation.

Rey pushed through the crowd, catching a glimpse for a split-second before the boy disappeared again. Rey weaved past the dancers on the dance floor, nearly on instinct, the reward of a flash of hair or a giggle to encourage her in her pursuit. It almost felt like a game—like the boy was leading her somewhere. The faces blurred around her, the colors from the lantern above fused together, the music was muted, blending with the beat of her heart pounding in her ears.

There was a magnetism that pulled Rey forward through the spaces between the dancers, leading her through a maze that ended with something important. The whispers in the Force ensured her of that. She broke through the crowd on the other side of the dance floor and found herself before a wall of viewports. The boy took off to the right, running down a corridor. It reminded her of her vision of a young Ben on Takodana. Was that what this was? Another vision? It was disappointing; it had all felt so real.

She didn't follow the boy away from the party. The viewports drew her attention. They commanded a view of rolling green hills that looked like waves crashing in a gentle sea in the darkness. No, not waves—sand dunes, as far as the eye could see. Rey felt drawn by it. What was out there for her to see? Other than the hills, there was nothing but stars. Her focus pulled away to her own reflection. The bags under her eyes, the sallow complexion, the lifelessness in her stare—all of the harshness in her features she had observed as of late—was gone. She looked...healthy.
Happy. It was a version of herself she didn't think was obtainable. As if in a trance, her hand moved on its own accord. It reminded her of the cave of mirrors as her fingers reached for her reflection, touching the cool transparent steel.

There was movement behind her that grasped her attention, and her glance trailed upward. In the reflection was a tall, broad man dressed entirely in black. Rey covered her gasp with her palm as she recognized the cruel, twisted mask.

*Kylo.*

He stood just beyond her left shoulder, silent as he took her in. She would have believed it another vision if she couldn't feel the heat of his body behind her. There was something like relief that bloomed when she saw him, but she knew he wasn't the man she wanted to see. The man she wanted to see was dead. The thought overwhelmed her to the point of tears, and she pushed past him to flee.

At once, a strong hand grabbed her arm, halting her escape. She spun around to demand her release, when she took in the man who stood before her. His clothes were dark save for a few meager green feather accents, but these were not intended for battle or practicality. He was dressed as if he belonged there. He still wore a mask, but this was not the one from her nightmares. The colors of his mask matched the one she wore, only inverse. It only covered his nose and around his eyes—his soft lips were left bare, his voice unaltered, his piercing eyes free to immobilize her. She would recognize those eyes anywhere. Bowing before her, he unfurled his fingers in a silent question.

"Ben?"

He smiled. "It's me, sweetheart." Rey knew his bare palm offered a warmth she had longed to feel again. "Join me?"

Her eyes shifted to the dance floor. She bit her lip anxiously. "I don't know how to dance."

"Follow my lead," he suggested. She placed her hand in his, and with a bob of the apple in his throat, he pulled her closer. With uncertain fingers, he took her other hand and placed it on his shoulder. Nodding in encouragement, he stepped backward, whipping her around to join the other dancers. The moment his feet began to move, his hesitancy faded. There was an intensity to his eyes that matched the energy flowing into her palm.

Logically, Rey presumed he was proficient at dancing after he had confided in her that his mother had given him dancing lessons. Experiencing his smooth, fluid movement as he swept her across the dance floor, however, helped her understand just how proficient he was. His steps were certain, his confidence in his capability palpable, his movements strong and true. He was ever the warrior, his skills on the battlefield echoed in his dancing.

Rey attempted to watch his feet, but the steps were complicated. She glanced around to watch the other dancers, but it was dizzying. "Rey," he whispered into her hair, bringing her attention back to him, "you're a warrior. Use it." Her mind recalled flashes of her movements in battle; her ferocity. She wasn't certain if they were her memories...or his. The message, however, was clear. She knew what she was missing.

*The Force.*

Rey remembered the lightsaber duals on Starkiller, on the Supremacy, on Mustafar, and on the Finalizer. She remembered how they trusted in the Force, their movements complementary as if they were choreographed...like a dance. Rey closed her eyes and allowed the Force to flow through
her, guiding her journey over the floor. She connected to him, his energy, and his steps. Their movements merged from two separate units into one. When she opened her eyes, her feet were no longer stumbling to catch up.

His eyes lost their confidence for a moment as she took control, driving him backward. He adapted quickly, spinning her around, and she caught a hint of a smile on his lips. The dance was a battle of its own—an exchange of give and take, push and pull, control and deference. She felt the ferocity that flowed through her in battle find its place in her dancing. She tilted her head to look up at him as he dipped her. His eyes were fixed on hers. "You look beautiful," he murmured. "Fierce."

Rey found it interesting that "fierce" and "beautiful" would be synonymous to him. Though Rey couldn't quite blame him; she found his intensity in everything he did drew her to him as well. She felt playful. "Do you like it when I'm fierce in battle?"

"I like it when you're fierce other times, too."

She hummed. "Such as?"

Ben didn't answer, instead choosing the moment to spin her again. But when she met his eyes again, there was something burning within them that made her steps falter. An odd shiver came over her; she stood transfixed in the center of the dance floor as the final notes of the song played. His gaze shifted to her lips. Would he kiss her?

The song ended, and the partygoers turned as Finn and Rose stepped up onto a hoverplatform. Poe stepped upon another hoverplatform, raising his glass for a toast. He began a speech to Finn and Rose, but she turned to Ben. His attention was focused on her friends, but his eyes found hers when she whispered, "I missed you." She had never spoken truer words. She felt how bereft her soul had been left without him, how deep the void he had left behind. She felt it all so profoundly in that moment that she nearly pulled herself out of the dream.

"On the trip out here?" he asked, his eyes searching hers with concern. "Couldn't sleep?" Rey shook her head. Confused. "I'm sorry. I thought it would help if you shared a cot with Rose or one of the other women. The bed felt too empty without you; I slept in the cockpit mostly. Finn sat up with me while the other men slept. I...enjoyed his company."

Rey still had no idea what he was talking about, other than his suggestion that the men and women had flown to the wedding separately. The thought that Ben would be friends with Finn or Poe was absurd, but she reminded herself that it was only a dream. "What did you talk about?" she asked as evenly as she could, her heart squeezing in sorrow that the dream would never become her reality. She knew his answer would only deepen the wound, but she wanted to imagine for a moment what life would have been like if the Force had been kinder.

"You," he said, a playful smile on his lips. "And Rose. Our memories of the First Order. He talked about why he didn't want to look at his stormtrooper file. We talked about the war. My dad. But mostly insignificant things. War stories, the Force, lightsabers..."

"So you're—what?—friends now?"

"We don't want to kill each other anymore, so I think that makes us friends," he said with a smile, but she didn't have it in her to return it. "I thought we put most of that behind us after I let him hit me. But the night we went to that cantina, he asked me to forgive him for the whole 'Ilum thing' and he told me some things about the Finalizer and what happened after. It seemed to really bother him, and I didn't expect that, but he was drunk—are you okay?"
"Sorry," she sniffled, carefully wiping her eyes. "I'm just...happy...that you two get along now."

Ben wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into his warmth. She wished she could stay in that dream forever. "Well, we do have a very serious dejarik battle going," he murmured into her hair.

She hiccuped a laugh, drying her eyes. "Do you now?"

He nodded against her, his voice rumbling against her cheek. "It's cutthroat. Mortal peril. Blood has been spilled."

"Well, I hope you find it in yourself to spare his life."

"Spare his life?" He growled in feigned offense. "He wins. Every time."

"Lies," she said, pushing herself from his embrace to glare at him playfully. "Ben Solo would never allow himself to lose more than once." The intensity in his eyes ignited again. She felt exposed under his stare, and she thought for the second time that night that he just might kiss her. "I've lost to you many times, and I'd lose to you again."

"I think you'll miss him," Rey said, redirecting the conversation to something that didn't make her chest feel so tight.

He hummed. "I won't miss losing."

"Well, not to worry. He will be busy liberating children in those impoverished mining colonies," she said. She didn't know where the words had come from, but she said it as if it was something they both should know well. "I'm sure he'll be out of practice by the next time you play." The playful banter between them was a happy distraction, but as his stare lowered to the floor, his shoulders bouncing as he quietly laughed, Rey was acutely aware of how deeply she missed him. She cleared her throat to tell him everything she wished she had told him before his death, but she never had the chance.

"And we wanted to thank Rey..." The lanterns brightened over her like a spotlight, singling her out in the crowd. With those words, she turned from Ben toward the voice. Evidently, Poe had finished his speech, and Finn stood on the holoplatform, addressing the crowd. "We couldn't have done any of this without you. You might be a hero to the galaxy, but, to us, you're the best friend and chosen sister anyone could ever ask for. Thank you for everything you did to make this day perfect. And Ben, we're thankful for you too. You're the only man who can keep up with my sister: good luck."

The other attendees laughed, clapping politely. The sound of the others around them seemed to snap Ben from his good mood. The smile faded from his face, and he stepped away from Rey, and out of the light focused on her. It wasn't embarrassment; he stood tall with his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes steadily scanning the room. His face was devoid of expression, so she nudged him. Her hands wrapped around his arm in an attempt to soothe him. His entire body was tense. She searched his eyes for the cause, but he was unyielding. His eyes darted back and forth, searching the crowd around them, the sudden tension in his shoulders making it clear he was uncomfortable. "Ben, what is it?"

His mind was elsewhere, so she grasped his hand and pulled him through the crowd and off the dance floor. When they were in the safety of the shadows, she cupped his face in her hands. "Tell me, what is it?"

"They know, Rey. And it's impossible to watch everyone's hands," he answered.
After what he had done, Rey knew an attempt on his life was still a realistic possibility, but they were at a wedding. No one would recognize him there. Even though he was being paranoid, she tried her best to assuage his fears. "I won't let anyone hurt you," she promised. "Those men up there on the balcony are watching everyone's hands for you." They both glanced up to see eight men in the balconies with blaster-rifles scanning the crowd. How had she known that? She reminded herself that it was a dream; she could make anything appear that she wanted.

He huffed a near laugh, his shoulders relaxing. His hand came up to stroke her cheek. "No, I don't want you to be collateral damage, Rey. Physically or...I don't want you to feel...I'm used to the stares and whispers; I'm Vader's grandson, after all. I've dealt with that my whole life. I'm worried about how it will affect you. Should I leave?"

She stepped forward and rested her hand on his cheek. "Ben, you talk like I'm embarrassed to be with you."

"Are you? We both know what I was."

"We both know who you are," she replied vehemently.

Then she noticed them...the whispers...the derisive stares...the nodding in their direction...the offenders could not be more conspicuous. Perhaps they want to be. Rey had presumed that no one would know who he was. Ben had spent most of his time with the First Order under a mask, and he was wearing one at the party like everyone else. These people, however, all knew Finn. They were high-level Alliance members, and there were many who knew his connection to her. With lips loosened by alcohol and the swift spread of a rumor, the entire wedding likely knew who he was. Why hadn't she realized the position that had put him in? Why couldn't it be easy; it was just a dream.

The anger burned to the surface, darkness quickly invading her senses as pushed deeper into the Force to listen to their cruel whispers. Doesn't it matter that he saved your galaxy? You should be thanking him, you unappreciative fools. She wanted to scream at them...make them pay for the pain she knew they were causing Ben. She stepped forward, but two fingers on her arm gently brought her back to reality. She could sense his reprimanding stare.

"You're not here for them," he whispered. "You're here for Rose and Finn. Let it go. There will be many more like them. This is...this is your life with someone like me."

Her glare bore daggers into anyone who looked their way. He's right. He knew they would be like this, but he still subjected himself to this torture. For me. I thought they would see what I can see. But they still stare at him like he's some...monster. Will this be how it is for him for the rest of our lives? He saved the galaxy. Will they ever be able to accept him?

Rey laughed at her thoughts. It was a sweet sentiment, but it was a dream. She wished those were her only worries. But she was never given that chance, because he had been taken from her. Her eyes met his, and she found sorrow staring back at her. But he half smiled in an attempt to reassure her. "This was why I couldn't stay," he said.

Rey awoke with a start.

She wished she could have told him that she wasn't embarrassed to be with him. If anything, she was thankful she had been by his side, reminding him that he wasn't alone anymore. Rey wished she'd had the chance to tell him everything she'd carried in her heart since his death. But that was the point, wasn't it? Whether or not Kylo Ren was alive, Ben Solo was dead. It was a beautiful dream—a dream she knew she would cherish for the foreseeable future—but a dream nonetheless.
Ben hadn't truly been there. None of it was real.

And yet, it changed something in her. It had provided her a comfort that nothing else could have. Though her anger had spiked with his last words, it faded the more she reflected on the dream. Perhaps, it was the Force's way of telling her why she couldn't have had her happy ending. Perhaps there was no happy ending to be had for him. He was gone. What was the point in being angry with a man who didn't love her? That forced her to face another truth. What was the point in being angry with a man who wasn't the man she loved? Kylo had left, but the dream reminded her of one truth: her heart would always belong to Ben. The dream had given her a chance to see him again, to hold him, to dance with him, to hear his voice, to see him alive one last time. It gave her a chance to see a future with him she would never have, but, more importantly, to be reminded of his unwavering love for her. There was no one alive who compared to that love, so it didn't matter if a man who looked like him had left her behind. It wasn't everything, but it was enough.
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Rey had always been good at two things: fixing what was broken and waiting. Lando had given her a job to do, and when she woke up the morning of her first day, she decided to focus her energy into that. Bespin was beautiful, her friends were in no rush to leave, and Rey found herself useful in the hangar.

After a substantial portion of stormtroopers had fled the Finalizer in the rebellion, the Alliance came to possess a fleet of TIE fighters. Poe had been the one to suggest that they be repainted rather than destroyed, as he had found their flying capabilities "remarkable." Rey volunteered alongside Rose to help with repairing them and restructuring them for the needs of the Alliance. It was strange at first, watching TIE fighters and X-Wings land and take off from the same hangar, but she supposed it was no different than watching former Resistance and First Order members working side by side.

That was how she spent her days—underneath TIE fighters. Most nights Rey spent gathered with her friends at the local cantinas, sipping on non-alcoholic concoctions that the Abednedo cantina owner mixed up with fruit juices from all across the galaxy. Even the nights Finn and Rose left early, Rey no longer felt like an outsider, exchanging war stories with former members from either side. A few days a week, she even met with Lando, so he could teach her how to play Sabaac.

It was more than she could have ever dreamed of on Jakku, even if she felt like something was missing. The nights were the hardest, though she never technically slept alone. Lando had been kind enough to find her a room in the mechanic quarters attached to the hangar, ensuring she had access to free meals every day. He told her she could work for her room and board, though he still paid her the full wages at the end of every week. When she asked about it, he would laugh and tell her it was "taken care of."

Though she was happy to have a room of her own, she found every excuse not to stay there. On some occasions, she would stay with Finn and Rose. Her friends introduced her to holodramas. Rey had never sat and just watched something for entertainment, so it was a difficult learning curve, but she did enjoy their company. They would fall asleep on the floor in front of the holovision and take holopics of the amusing positions they found themselves arranged in upon awakening. Rey was able to be herself in their company, even if that meant allowing them to see her tears. She cherished her time with them, but she knew they needed time alone as a couple well.

Lando let her "accidentally" fall asleep in one of his big, comfy chairs whenever she was over for a visit, before he made his way to his upper level with whatever droid or lifeform had suited his fancy that week. The species or gender didn't matter, and though Rey was impressed by the sheer number, she couldn't help wondering if he was just as lonely as she was. There was only one man for her, and she would never settle for anyone else. She wondered if there had been someone like that for Lando, and now he just filled that empty space with someone to warm his bed.

There was always a look in his eyes when he covered her in blankets before he went up to bed—when he thought she was sleeping or she pretended she was—that seemed...sad. At first, she thought it was because he wanted her to leave, but he never made her feel like she was imposing. He seemed grateful to have someone to talk to when he made excuses to feed her in the morning...after he made his important daily holocall that he woke up at an unconscionable hour to receive. She had overheard him once, and it almost sounded like he was speaking to a child. By the time she woke up most days, he had an entire spread ready for them to share between the two of them. Lando always asked her back and always gave her a reason to stay.
Still, Rey knew she couldn't rely on the others forever. Her friends or Lando would ask about her plans for the future or her thoughts for settling down. She imagined making Cloud City her home, but her heart was calling her to the stars. There was a mission she still had to complete. In the meantime, she avoided the room with an empty side of the bed, and her friends were kind enough not to mention it. They did what they could to give her belonging, and she couldn't have been more grateful.

Then one morning, Poe brought her a green and yellow astromech that needed repairs. The admiral acted as if she were doing him a favor, though perhaps at the time she was, as she was barely on speaking terms with him. That was before the night he asked her to take a walk with him, when they sat on the edge of a landing platform, staring up at the stars. That was the night he broke down in a drunken haze, apologizing for using her as a pawn to win a war. He apologized for the Hutts, the clones, what he had done to Ben, the trap he had set, but mostly he asked forgiveness for what he had made her do. No matter how much resentment she had held for what he had done, it wasn't in her heart not to forgive. It was how she had come to know the real Ben, and she would never change something that had brought someone so special into her life.

Rey spent weeks fixing the droid after her work in the hangar. When she asked Poe about who she should return the droid to after she was finished, he smiled and told her the droid had been abandoned. He gave her the choice of keeping it or letting him pay her for it once it was fixed. It didn't take long for her to discover that Poe had rescued the BB unit from being sold for parts, but she never mentioned it to him. They both knew the true reason he had given the droid to her was so she wouldn't have to go back to her room alone.

When the day came to finally power up the main drives, Rey was so happy that she invited her friends over to celebrate with her. Rose and Finn were kind enough to stay the first night in her room, but after that, the thought of going back to her room at night wasn't so terrible. Though she would never admit it, Rey found it easier to go back to her room at night with an obnoxiously chattery droid in tow. Lando never mentioned that she fell asleep at his home less and less, and Rey never asked Poe how he had known she had been lonely.

Rey let the young female BB unit pick her own name. She was in stitches that the young droid chose “Gee-Bee” when she heard the name of the other resident astromech. Beebee-Ate was not as excited about the development, nor was he particularly fond of the new droid following him wherever he went when Rey was busy. He was especially jealous when Gee-Bee so much as looked at Poe. As much as he complained, she knew he still enjoyed having the other droid around.

Rey had made quite a life for herself there. She had a job, a place to stay, a chosen family, and a loyal droid at her side. Some nights, the war and losses they suffered seemed like a horrible dream. Everyone still carried the scars, but it was easy to smile when the only stress of the job was a flight computer that had a mind of its own, when the sirens only sounded when someone accidentally fired a TIE laser-cannon into the wall, and when she watched her friends plan weddings rather than burials. She had almost everything she could have wanted there, and, for the time being, that was enough.

Rey was firing up a TIE fighter for a test flight when Poe Dameron hailed her over her comlink. The engines were still powering down as she jumped out, sprinting across the hangar. She could sense the admiral's energy in the empty war room, and mynocks began fluttering in her belly. They were expecting word back from the council, and she knew he had news of a mission.

Poe smiled brightly as she entered. She bent down to greet Beebee-Ate first, rubbing him fondly. Gee-Bee followed them in, immediately drawn to Beebee.
"Oh, I see how it is," Poe chuckled. Rey grinned as she crossed the room to him, wrapping her arms around him. "Have I told you lately what a wonderful leader you are?"

He chuckled. "I'm listening."

"And the best pilot in the Republic Systems Alliance—"

"I see what you did there—"

"And charming, and witty, and roguishly handsome—"

"Now I know you're lying," he said, pushing her away playfully.

"I promise, I'm not," she said with a smile, but it faded as the significance of their conversation settled between them. "Please tell me the news."

Poe reached across his desk to grab a datapad. "The council has assigned you and me to a secret mission."

"Secret." She bit her lip with excitement. "Sounds promising."

"Tell me that you forgive me for it taking a while...."

Rey stuck her hand out, open palm, as she waited for him to tire of his game. "Good thing it's in my nature to forgive."

"No kidding," he huffed, handing her a datapad. "We're going back to Jakku. While following a lead called in by an anonymous local, the squadron engaged a group of Imperial loyalists on Carbon Ridge."

"The dead-enders...." Rey remembered them from her time spent on Jakku. They were mysterious men who guarded the ridge, scaring off locals by throwing rocks and babbling in nonsensical languages, but the most intriguing aspect was their military-like attire.

"They destroyed the ridge, but terrain mappers found anomalies under the surface. They mapped an entire underground base hidden there. If there was an entrance on Carbon Ridge, it was destroyed, but they believe there is another one in Tuanul. Intelligence found a connection between the base, Lor San Tekka and...Force Destiny. The machine may have been in a protected section of the base. He may have been chosen to protect it from being found by the First Order."

She wrapped her arms around him in excitement. "It's almost over!"

"Am I still charming and witty and handsome?"

"Roguishly!" she laughed. "I'll meet you in the hangar in an hour!"

Rey felt giddy as she returned to her room. With thoughts bouncing around her head, she packed her meager possessions in a bag. Gee-Bee was full of questions about their mission, but Rey couldn't find it in herself to be irritated. There was a growing feeling of anticipation—of hope—but there was also the feeling of what she would be leaving behind. In the short time she had been there, Cloud City had become her temporary home. The people had become her family. She had been waiting for this day, however, and she knew that, while she would always have a home and a family there, there was another life out there for her. This place was no Jakku, but she had spent
enough time waiting. She had missions to fulfill—a larger responsibility to the galaxy.

A knock at the door broke her from her thoughts, and she smiled when she saw Lando, Finn, and Rose on the other side.

"I heard you were leaving," Lando said, presenting her with a forest green cape. "This is for you on your journey. We'll, uh, miss you around here, kid."

"I won't be gone long," she assured him.

There was a clandestine glint in the older man's eye. "Yes, you will." Lando patted Rey on the back, and the smile on his face was genuine. He didn't believe she would return, but he was happy for her. Rey wrapped her arms around the man who had become the closest person to a father she'd had in her life, picking up where Han had left off. "Good luck," he told her, "but remember to make some of your own, too." With that, he bid his farewell, turning with a flourish of his cape. In his wake, he left her standing before her chosen family.

She wrapped her arms around Rose. "Poe did it. I can't believe Poe actually did it." She pressed her face into Rose's neck. "I know I've been waiting for this, and I have to do this for myself, but I'm afraid. What if—"

Rose shook her head. "No 'what-ifs.' You've come so far; no sense turning back now."

"I'll miss you," Rey whispered. It was the first time they would be separated since the end of the war. She had never had a family before; she didn't know how to leave them behind.

"I'll miss you too." Rose said it with such love, such devotion and loyalty, Rey knew it wouldn't be the last time they saw each other. Rose would never allow her to be alone again. "Who else is going to entertain me in the hangar until we leave for the wedding?"

"Hey, what about me?" Finn griped in jest.

Rey grinned at her best friend. "It's a short mission; I'll be back in time."

"You better be," he said. "I can't get married without my best friend there."

"I wouldn't miss it for the galaxy." Rey was a grooms-woman, after all. Her dream had given her plenty of ideas to offer the bride, who—once it had been described to her—had been intent on recreating. "Plus, you two went through all that effort, making it on the same day and location as the council hearing. I don't know if you did that to force me to go to your wedding or force me to go to the hearing, but I love you both for it." They were together. They were smiling. They were happy. But their smiles faded as they realized their time together as they knew it was coming to an end.

"Are you leaving now?" Rose asked softly.

"Yes. I'm supposed to meet Poe any minute, I'm sorry, I wanted more time—"

"I know, but it's okay. Go." Finn took her hands and placed a homing beacon in her palm, a matching one wrapped around his own wrist. "No matter how long you're gone, you'll always have a home to return to with us." He slipped a comlink from his pocket into her other hand. "No matter where you go, we'll always have each other. No matter how far we are across the galaxy, nothing will keep us apart. I believe that."

"Poe and I will be back soon enough," she assured him. She planned to be gone a few weeks at the
most. "I love you, my friend."

The smile that crossed his lips was a little sad and very knowing—as if he believed the mission would take longer than she expected. "I love you, too."

"Group hug," Rey said, as she opened her arm for Rose to join them in their embrace. "Thank you both. Thank you for everything."
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Rey had felt nothing that she had expected as they transitioned from hyperspace and the bright orange of Jakku came into view. Poe seemed more nervous as he talked endlessly over the comms. "I bet they're not too excited to see two TIE fighters on the horizon again, huh?" She didn't know what the locals would think of the two ships, painted white and orange, as they landed at Niima Outpost for refueling. It was a necessity before they made the quick flight to Tuanul, but as they landed at the outpost, Rey felt as if her restraints just might suffocate her. All the stomach-churning familiarity fell back into place as she opened the cockpit hatch; the overwhelming chatter in hundreds of different languages, the stale smell of sweat and desperation, the oppressive heat. All of it came flooding back, and everything in her wanted to turn and flee. Gee-Bee whirred softly behind Rey, giving her strength to step down onto the rough sand for the first time since she had left.

Poe stood back, leaning against the other TIE. They both recognized that this was something she had to do alone. Her hands shook as she approached one of Plutt's men and negotiated a price for fuel. She had seen the man before, but he didn't seem to recognize her. She didn't look much like the old Rey, she admitted. No longer facing starvation, soft curves had replaced the harsher lines of a scavenger. Her shimmering green tunic and grey trousers were a far cry from the light, thin material she wore in the Jakku sun. Her longer hair, down around her shoulders, and her heavy green cape fluttered in the breeze. She looked like one of the travelers Rey had envied when she saw them pass through.

Settling on a price, the man attempted to make conversation. "What's a drip like you doing in the middle of nowhere with an imperial fighter?" Rey hadn't heard his question, too focused on their negotiated price. It was a much fairer price than she had expected—it was a much fairer price than Plutt would have allowed.

"Where is he?" she forced herself to ask. "Plutt?"

"Dead," came the impassive reply.

"How long?"

He shrugged as he worked to fuel up the TIE fighter. "A few months?"

She didn't know why tears pooled in her eyes; the turbulent emotions were difficult to sort through. She owed the man less than nothing, but perhaps she wanted him to see her as she was now. She had never been "nothing" as the creature had told her, but she wanted him to see just how wrong he was. "What happened?"

"Complications from losing an arm," he said, and that was that. The creature behind years of her torment was gone. She understood how Ben had felt in the throne room after his master was dead. Perhaps he had felt this when Luke first died as well. She had expected relief that it was finally over, but after that, she felt nothing. His death was nothing to her; his death changed nothing for her, because he meant nothing to her. He held no power over her anymore.

It was good for the people of Jakku that Plutt was gone. The change wouldn't have only affected the fuel prices. The scavengers would finally be given rations they could survive on...or perhaps even credits. They may not be living a life of luxury, but they wouldn't be slaves to that creature.
and his thugs any longer.

She looked out into the direction of the abandoned AT-AT. It had likely been raided, leaving only her scratch marks behind. Rey had thought she would be drawn to return, to stare upon those scratches with the eyes of the woman who had everything that girl had been waiting for—or almost everything. There was nothing calling her out there, however, because there was nothing there for her anymore. It was strange to be so close and let it go.

Stepping away from the sands she once called home, she made her way back to the cockpit and caught sight of a man up the aisle. His head was down, arms crossed as he oversaw the refueling of a shuttle, but she would recognize those red tattoos anywhere. flashes of that night returned, and she covered her mouth to hide her gasp, but he heard it. As if he could sense her in the Force, his eyes snapped directly to hers. One of the eyes was clouded and dead, no doubt a result of her fighting back. A sick grin spread across his face. He remembered her.

Her ship was finished fueling; Rey could leave that hellhole forever and never look back. She would, but she wanted to wipe that grin off his disgusting face. She knew what she would do, because she had seen it before. She barely moved—just a slight clench of her hand, and the man's eyes widened in fear. He grasped for his throat as a grin spread across her lips. He stumbled away in panic, tumbling over containers as the contents spilled to the ground. Rey could feel the darkness casting a shadow over her thoughts as he continued to kick and thrash on the rough sand. Several onlookers rushed in to help, but there was nothing they could do for him.

There was movement on her right as Poe came to stand beside her with his hand on his blaster, likely drawn in by the commotion. He was silent, but she knew he knew what she had done. She also knew he would stand by as she did what she needed to do. Poe's presence, however, was enough to break through the cloud of darkness. Her hand unclenched, releasing the man at the sobering realization that she almost killed him. As he gasped for breath in the sands, Rey turned back to Poe with a grin.

"Ready?" A charming smile crossed the Admiral's face, and he slipped his helmet on in response. Rey climbed into her fighter, setting course to Tuanul. Refusing to take even one last glance at that horrible place, she started the fighter and left that life behind for good.

It was strange, crossing the dunes in the safety of a fighter. As they flew over endless sand, Rey pointed out places where one thing or another had happened. Poe laughed and responded either with, "How do you see that? It all looks the same," or "If you say so." He gestured in a general direction when he told her of his brief adventures on the backwater planet. She included Finn in the conversation over comlink, and, though it was the middle of the night cycle for him, he was a good sport and broke up the stories with sarcastic comments about how he sincerely hated the planet.

Looking down at the locals below, Rey both envied and pitied their ignorance of the galaxy around them. The war had raged on around them, yet it hadn't affected them at all. They lived their lives as if nothing had happened. She thought of everything she was able to see and experience and was grateful that her life had collided with a droid those many months ago. It seemed right that she had come back to Jakku with that droid and one of the men who set all the following events into motion. Finn was thankful he didn't have to see it again, though Rey knew he was there with her in spirit. If only the other man who had set those events in motion could have been there as well. She was grateful she had her droid, who reminded her that this mission would begin the first chapter of the rest of her life.

Rey brought her ship down closer to the surface, sending columns of sand into the sky in her wake. Poe rolled his fighter over a dune next to her, and she laughed at his showmanship. They crested
over a wall of sand, and she laid her eyes on the ruins she had heard so much about—Tuanul. She wasn't certain how many residents had survived the massacre, but none of them had returned to the place. Rey and Poe set their fighters down on the edge of the village, then walked side by side, the two droids rolling ahead.

The buildings were burned, and sand covered half-buried weapons, machinery, and speeders—as if it had all been left exactly as it had been that night. The only visible proof that anyone had been there was a marker for the dead, who had been buried in a mass grave. Poe stepped over to the marker, and she realized he had a metallic object in his hand. He snapped a holophoto of the marker and slipped the cam back into his pocket. "Closure," he mumbled by way of explanation. "For Finn."

Slip, Rey remembered. His best friend. If it was a mass grave, then both sides had been buried together. In the end, their differences didn't matter.

As they moved toward the center of the village, she wondered which side had buried them all. Poe stopped, and she nearly collided with him. "This was where they captured me," he said as he stood staring at the sand at his feet. She waited for him to say more—to tell the story of how Ben had halted the blaster bolt, or how he watched the First Order kill the villagers, but he just stood silently for a few moments with his head bowed. He began walking again without a word, and Rey fell into step next to him.

"That was my fighter." Poe pointed off to the right as they walked further into the village. Following his gesture, she saw the burned skeleton of an X-wing. She could almost hear the explosion, could almost hear the screams of the dying that night. Rey wondered if maybe she could hear them, if somehow those moments had left an imprint in the Force there.

Poe led her to the home of Lor San Tekka. The external structure was black and charred, the curtains and drapery in the front room burned away. The fire had consumed most of the residence, but the back rooms were left intact. One room was filled with artifacts of the Jedi religion. Rey followed the shelves around the room, touching the spines of old books, running her fingers over dust-covered lightsabers, admiring colorful, gem-shaped statues. There were comlinks, capes, jewelry, and scrolls. There were some older objects that she couldn't identify. It seemed like a shame to leave them all in an abandoned town on a backwater planet, so Rey began piling them into an old pack that she found next to some blankets.

When she had fit all she could, she slung it onto her shoulder and turned to search for Poe. She nearly collided with him as she exited the room. "Whoa, there," he laughed, grasping her arms to steady her. When she met his eyes, his smile grew. "I found it." He gestured with his head, and she followed him to another room, stomach fluttering in anticipation. The floor covering had been pushed aside, and what appeared to be a blastdoor lay hidden underneath, which didn't make sense unless it led....

"Underground?"

"Yes," Poe answered behind her. "There used to be a compound here. They tore it down, then built this place, this entire village, to hide...this." He walked to the blastdoor and raised his weapon. "Work your magic, Jedi."

Rey stood before the blastdoor and reached deep into the Force, manipulating the energy around her. Wrapping it around the door, she tried to pry the two sides of the door apart. It wouldn't budge. She tried to push the door inward, and, when that didn't work, pull it outward. It clearly had been made to withstand efforts from the Force. Out of frustration, she released a torrent of energy through her fingers into the control panel.
Poe jumped back as blue sparks burst from her hand. The vibrating arcs crossed through the panel and into the door, sizzling and crackling in search of ground. After a moment, her body swayed from exhaustion, and she released her hold over the energy. The door remained infuriatingly sealed shut. Poe was still staring at her, partly in awe, partly in fear. "Hold this," she huffed, removing the pack from her shoulder and shoving it into his arms. He begrudgingly shifted it to the same shoulder he carried his own bag.

She unclipped her lightsaber, ignited it, and stabbed it into the bottom of the blastdoor. The durasteel began to melt away as she dragged the saber slowly between the two panels in the door. When the blade reached the top, the connecting portion of the door had melted away enough that she could fit the blade in the center. Cutting in a circle, she melted away enough of the durasteel to be able to fit through.

Sticking her arm through the hole, she used the light from her blade to see into the darkness. "I see steps," she relayed to the admiral. "They lead down as far as I can see." That was all she told him before positioning herself over the hole and dropping down to the floor below her. She used the light to guide her way as she followed the steps to wherever they led. If it was buried down there, abandoned, she wondered why no one had ever come for it.

As she descended, the heat of the desert air gave way to a damp, bone-numbing cold. She could see her breath leave her lips in a cloud. Though she hadn't heard Poe drop down behind her, he was at her side within a few moments. The further they went, the darker it grew. Part of her thought they just might descend forever into the darkness, but her light finally illuminated a solid floor below them. When she looked back up the steps, she could no longer see the light from the surface.

They moved through an entryway into a vaulted room. There was a control panel that stretched for nearly eight meters. There were at least ten more blastdoors on each wall, and however many more were behind those. "This thing has been abandoned for years; there's no way we're powering it back up," she sighed in frustration. They were so close; she could feel the energy there. She could feel something else, too—a familiarity, as if she'd seen that place before.

Poe dropped both packs onto the floor and hastily dug through the contents of his. "Datapad," he said by way of an answer. Blue extended a tool arm and connected to the panel, chirping questions about what data Poe wanted him to collect. It was then that Rey understood his intentions, and she was thankful the admiral had thought ahead. The droid would download the information from the control panel computer onto a drive, and Poe would access it on his datapad. Everything they needed to know would, hopefully, be on that drive.

In minutes, Poe was scrolling through data and readouts. "It's the far door on the left," he announced, and she was overcome with a relief that rivaled the moment they had defeated Sidious. This was it; this was what she had been waiting for. This was the reason they had traveled half-way across the galaxy, and it had been in her own backyard the entire time. Poe returned her smile—she must have been positively beaming—and kicked his pack across the floor to her. As it slid into her boots, she noticed the contents. Explosives. It was time to destroy this place and the Emperor's contingency plan once and for all. She lifted the pack onto her shoulder and ignited her lightsaber.

She made slow work of the blastdoor, but, eventually, there was enough room to slip inside. Her lightsaber illuminated a set of controls first, blanketed with dust from disuse. She moved further into the room, the air stale and musty around her, and then...there it was. The machine that had taken the life of whoever Snoke had been. The machine that had given life back to Sidious, and, with it, another chance to destroy every last descendant of Anakin Skywalker. She wondered if the person responsible for reincarnating Sidious had any idea of the destruction and pain and suffering he would cause. She wondered if they cared. She wondered why the Jedi had chosen to protect this
machine and its location, rather than destroy it themselves. The machine may have given life, but all it wrought upon the galaxy was death.

And yet, as Rey stood staring at the large crystal and circular bars that crisscrossed at an angle, it was difficult not to *imagine* the possibilities. There were so many people she had lost, there were so many people she could *bring back*. It was difficult to not let the absolute power and capability of change the machine possessed tempt her to revise fate's design. With this machine, it made the user more powerful than the Cosmic Force. It was difficult not to listen to the whispers of the *possibilities*. The galaxy would be a brighter place with Anakin and Padmé, Han and Leia, Luke, Dev, Chewie, and so many others. She could bring back her parents, ask them why, receive answers to the questions she had spent endless nights wondering. She struggled with the light and darkness within herself to make the right choice, because, either way, it was a choice she could *never* take back.

*What would you do, Ben?*

It was ironic, she supposed, that the one person she wanted back the most was the one person the machine couldn't give her. Somewhere out in the stars, a man named Kylo Ren existed. Though he was a good man, no longer a threat to the galaxy, he wasn't her Ben. Her Ben was dead. He had died that night in an escape shuttle, but even a machine as powerful as *Force Destiny* couldn't bring him back. Even if it could, she knew. She knew without a doubt in her soul what he would do—what he would have wanted. With a sad smile, she placed the charges on the machine. If they placed enough, the entire cavern would collapse. This entire place would be buried under thousands of tons of sand forever.

When Rey returned to the control panel, she began placing more of the explosives. She nearly bumped into the admiral in her work, and it was his complete distraction from the task that drew her attention. "Poe?"

"Rey," he whispered, his voice strained. His eyes were fixated on the datapad in his hand. "I think you need to see this."

Her stomach dropped. "Why?" Studying the deep etch of his brow and the agitated way he rubbed at it, whatever it was, it wasn't good.

"You were abandoned here, right?" he said carefully. "By your parents?"

*What does this matter right now?*

They had a long flight back to Bespin, and if he truly wanted to know the particulars—at least the small amount she knew—she would be more than happy to share it with him. Sharing while standing in the middle of a room full of explosives seemed like the wrong time for bonding. "They brought me to Jakku for some Force-user program, but I wasn't good enough or something. They didn't care for me, so they sold me."

"They brought you here," he said softly.

"Right, and then I waited here until Finn—"

"No, they brought you *here.*" Poe's eyes finally met hers, and there was something indecipherable burning within them. She was so focused on it that it took her a moment to comprehend his words. The realization shuddered like ice through her veins, and the world around her tilted on its axis. "It was a program," he continued, "to kill off all the potential Jedi and feed their powers to Sidious. They advertised in the low-income areas of industrialized worlds, targeting the desperate. Parents
were promised more credits than they could ever dream of if their child was accepted to the program. It was Sidious. This was his program. They used that machine to murder thousands of children, and the parents had no resources to fight back.

As the tears welled in the admiral's eyes, Rey was vaguely aware it was the most emotion she had ever seen in him. She would have considered it further if she could remember how to breathe first. "It says you were slated for death, it says you died, but there was no body. You escaped. It's got everything here, Rey. This holopic looks just like you, the same buns and everything. It has your full name, your real name, your parent's names, your homeworld, your birthdate...." He cleared his throat and offered her the datapad with an outstretched arm.

All at once, Rey felt a warmth in the Force at her back, a concentration of energy as if someone rested a hand on her shoulder in support. There was no one else there physically, yet she knew they were not alone in the room. She was not alone.

Exhaling slowly, she glanced back at the datapad. It was all she had ever wanted to know. She had been searching for answers for so long. She would know who she had once been, where she had belonged, who her family had been. It was like a gift from the Cosmic Force itself—answers to all the questions that had followed her through the harsh, unforgiving sands and dark, lonely nights. It had once been the only temptation for answering the call of the darkness. It had been everything.

Perhaps that was why Poe's face twisted in confusion when she whispered, "Destroy the file."

"What? Rey, are you sure? It has—"

"I know what my name is, I know who my family are, I know where I belong. I don't need a file to tell me any of that. Whatever is written there—it's the past," Rey said, a small, private smile growing on her lips. "It's time to let the past die."

Poe scratched his chin as he considered her. He knew all the information in that file; he knew her old name. She may have wanted to leave it behind, but would he? Poe stared at her for a moment, then glanced down at the datapad. With a shrug, Poe disconnected the drive and threw it on the floor. "All right, Rey, we'll let it all die."

With a grin, he tossed her a few more charges from his bag, and they scattered them about for good measure. They stood in the entryway, appreciating their work. Poe nodded, and without a word, began making his way up the steps again. Rey ignited her lightsaber and twisted it in a quick flourish. As she followed him up the steps, she took one last look behind her. "Goodbye," she whispered as the room disappeared out of sight.

The light was blinding as Poe and then Rey climbed up through the hole in the blastdoor and out of the dilapidated hut. Rey blocked her eyes from the sun as she had watched the offworlders do in Niima. She was an off-worlder now. Gée-Bee and Beebee raced back to the fighters as Rey and Poe walked through the sand.

A device in Poe's pocket began beeping. He pulled it out and clicked a button to activate it. A holo appeared projected above the circular holoprojector, and, at first glance, Rey assumed it was Finn. Then she noticed the long, thin braids of hair and the dark beard on the man's face. She had seen this man before...in a dream. Though she was intrigued, she looked away respectfully. If she were having a conversation with...someone else, she wouldn't want others listening in. Rey slowed her speed incrementally as Poe carried on his conversation, so he could have his privacy. Although, realistically, it was almost impossible to ignore the exchange in the otherwise silent landscape.

"I know, I know. I'm late."
"Mmm-hmm, why am I not surprised?" the other man said, his accent very similar to her own.

"We found it, we actually found it," Poe said quietly, and he sounded profoundly relieved. She realized how deeply it had been weighing on him as well. "Just finished setting the charges. You can stay around for the fireworks if you want."

"I think I'll pass; I get enough of those on Galactic Independence Day," the other man laughed. "Though I don't think I should have to remind you that you were the one to plan this holiday. The one I'm currently enjoying alone?"

"Point taken. I'll be there soon."

"Straight here?" There was something...soft in the man's tone.

Poe feigned an exasperated sigh. "Yes, Dad, I've already refueled and everything." Rey was confused for a moment, as the other man was definitely not Poe's father, but then she recognized the sarcasm. That's what parents do, she reminded herself, they worry about you. Rey thought of Han, Luke, Lando, Leia, Maz and Chewie, even Finn, in his own "big brother" way, and realized that maybe she finally understood that, too.

"Okay, safe flight. I love you, Poe."

"I love you too, Neek'o."

Poe deactivated the projector and slipped the device into his pocket. Slowing his pace, he fell into step alongside her. His attention, however, was a million parsecs away. He smiled as he stared off into the distance. It was different than the charming, charismatic smile she was used to. This one was softer, warmer. Rey knew this smile, because it was a smile she had seen before on someone else—this was a smile of a man in love. She found herself smiling as well. Poe seemed to notice her attention was on him and he turned to her, scratching the back of his head. "No one else knows yet...except Finn, because he introduced us...and Rose, because it was probably her idea...and Beebee, obviously, who probably loves him more than me now...so if you could not tell anyone else...."

She smiled, turning to stare out at the endless sand. "Of course, I know all about that."

"I guess you do," he huffed uncomfortably. "This isn't arch-enemy forbidden, obviously, but it is direct subordinate forbidden. I haven't figured out what to tell the Alliance yet."

"Just tell them the truth." Rey scrunched her nose, squinting to meet Poe's gaze through the blinding sun. "I've heard it can spare you a lot of trouble."

He chuckled, though his face betrayed him, his brows furrowed in disbelief that it was that simple. Rey, however, believed the Alliance would surprise him. Love was love, after all. "He's a former stormtrooper," he added. Most would have found it an odd non-sequitur, but not Rey.

"Poe Dameron, you have changed."

"Yeah, well, love has a way of doing that." There was an understanding in his eyes that spoke of more than just his relationship with Neek'o. She smiled in gratitude.

"Yes, it does," she whispered, hoping her voice wouldn't betray her. With a quick swipe of her arm, as if wiping sweat off her brow, Rey eliminated any trace of the tears collecting at the corner of her eyes. "So, what should I say when I arrive back at Bespin without you?"
"Oh, you're not going back to Bespin."

She snorted. "Well, I'm certainly not going on holiday with you, lover boy."

"No," he said clandestinely. "You're going to Tatooine."

She stopped. "What's on Tatooine?"

"Another mission, one I knew you wouldn't turn down. Lando just received a tip...Rey?" Poe turned around when he realized she had stopped walking. Shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand, he raised his voice slightly, so it would carry over the distance between them. "Rumor has it that it's the location of the slab of Carbonite containing Sidious."

Rumor?

Her eyes narrowed. It was the single most important object in the entire galaxy. Rey had never thought to ask what they had done with it—with that evil creature—but she imagined they would have it contained somewhere safe...a museum with a security system that rivaled the one in Lando's saferoom...an isolation cell at Megalox Beta surrounded by laser cannons...a temple guarded by Force-sensitives...or rathtars...or porgs. "How do you not know where they're hiding that thing?"

Poe shrugged. "It was 'need-to-know,' and I didn't."

She shook her head. Her mission was to destroy Force Destiny, not this. "I can't."

"It's up to you," he shrugged, but his eyes held more consequence. "But I think you should."

"Why me?" Rey asked skeptically. "Why now?"

He waited for her to join him at the crest of the hill before answering. "I know how much you want this to be over. Here's your chance."

"Why was it hidden on Tatooine?"

"Because it's the last place anyone would look, I guess." Before Rey could ask more, he had pulled a small, black detonator from his bag. "Care to do the honors?"

He handed her the device that brought back memories of the remote on the Finalizer that had sealed the former Emperor's fate. It felt right that, with a similar device, the galaxy would be free of him forever. For her, this path had begun with Force Destiny, and, with its destruction, that path would finally come to an end. Exhaling slowly, she held her finger over the button, taking one last glance at Poe. He nodded in encouragement.

As they stood by their fighters, atop a hill that overlooked the village where their lives had crossed and their journey had begun, Rey pushed the button that would put an end to the Empire, the First Order, and any Contingency Plan for the future. There was a deep rumble that shuddered underneath their feet. The buildings shifted, and some further collapsed into ruin as the cavern imploded in on itself. It wasn't the grand display she had been expecting, but Rey had never seen anything as satisfying.

"Here, keep in touch," Poe said, tossing her a small, circular holoprojector. He turned back to his ship, and she turned back to hers, and she wondered briefly if their paths would ever cross again. The way he smiled at her when he glanced back over his shoulder had a wistful undertone.

"How will I find it on Tatooine?" she asked as she loaded Gee-Bee onto the TIE fighter.
With a grunt, he tossed his pack and helmet into the cockpit. "It's on a moisture farm."

"A moisture farm?"

"Yeah, it was abandoned back in the days of the Empire after the owners died," he said as he loaded a chirping Beebee-Ate into his own fighter. "Owen and Beru Lars."

Rey kicked at the sand before squinting in his direction. Poe was already climbing into the cockpit when she shouted after him, "Are those names supposed to mean anything to me?"

"No, but their nephew's might!"

"Luke..." she whispered to the wind. The creature had been hidden on Tatooine in the home where Luke had grown up. She wondered if he had ever returned there, or if it had remained a time capsule of the day he had left, as her AT-AT had become of her life on Jakku. The sound of engines snapped her from her thoughts. Poe gave her a salute as his fighter lifted off the ground, his eyes saying what his voice did not. Goodbye. She managed to bite back tears as she returned his gesture with a wave. Then he was gone, twin ion engines screaming as he shot up into the sky.

"I've always wanted to fly one of these."

Rey turned to the familiar voice, finding the man whose name she had uttered moments before. His blue aura was bright against the orange sands. He looked much the same as he had appeared that night on the Millennium Falcon, the same as he had appeared in Ben's memories of the Jedi temple. His eyes were fixed on studying the gleaming white wings of the fighter. "So, how is it?"

"Fast, responsive—much better after we made some modifications to the defense shields and hyperdrive.... What are you doing here?"

Luke chuckled. "I think I should be asking you what I'm doing here. I heard my name."

"It just so happens my next mission is to find a moisture farm on Tatooine," she said casually.

His eyes were knowing. "Is that so?"

"You know who's rumored to be hidden there." Images of a twisted laugh, frozen in time, flashed in her mind. Wherever Sidious and his Carbonite tomb had been hidden, she hoped they had hidden him well.

"I do."

"Then tell me what to do. I don't know what to do," she said softly. "Do I set course for Tatooine in hopes that I find him, or do I go back to Bespin and let him stay hidden?"

"I think...that's a question only you can answer."

"My life is back in Cloud City; my friends are waiting for me to come back after this mission. I don't know if it's my place to go, how long I'll be gone, how to find him. What if he's not there? Do I keep searching the galaxy until I find him? It's across the galaxy, and I've never gone that far alone—"

"You've crossed the galaxy before."

There had been many times she had crossed the galaxy, including when she had done it to find the man before her on Ahch-To. She knew, however, that he wasn't talking about any of that. They
both knew he was reminding her of when she had fled Ahch-To to cross the galaxy for her bondmate and sworn enemy. "He was worth crossing the galaxy for."

"Is this?"

"Yes," she whispered. Even though she couldn't sense more than her heart pounding in her ears, vibrating the energy of the Force around her, she knew it was calling to her. She loved her family on Bespin, but she knew this was something she had to do.

Luke nodded. "Then I think you have your answer."

"How will I find it? Your home?" she asked, staring off in the direction of her old home. There was only sand as far as the eye could see, but she knew it was out there. Everything she had done since she left that place was out of determination and necessity to end a war. It had brought her here. This...this felt like a choice. "How will I do this alone?"

"You're not alone," he said, and her gaze flickered up to his. There was something knowing in those bright blue eyes. "You've got the Force to guide you."
Chapter End Notes

Force-choking of a minor character
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
Rey never thought she would dislike a planet as much as she disliked Jakku. She was wrong. Tatooine was another harsh, desert world, but it wasn’t like barren Jakku, sand as far as the eye could see. Sand was abundant on Tatooine as well, but, unlike Jakku, the places they could have hidden Sidious were endless. There were small villages of indigenous species, but there were larger cities as well. There were even palaces, but they looked abandoned as far as she could tell. The large canyons made it difficult to see far distances or detect smaller settlements. If that wasn’t enough, the planet had a strange magnetic field that made sensing energy in the Force difficult. In short, she had no idea where to start to find the Lars moisture farm.

Rey set the TIE fighter down in Mos Eisley, the largest city she could find. It was clearly home to many unsavory characters, and Rey left Gee-Bee in the ship with orders to blast anyone who approached with the onboard cannons. She wondered what would happen to these lawless cities now that the Hutt empire and their lucrative slavery business was gone. Would the people of Tatooine finally take their cities back? Would this desert world finally find the peace and order that Ben had imagined?

Pulling the hood of her cloak over her head, she walked into the local cantina, hoping they could point her in the correct direction before nightfall. It was difficult to estimate with the binary suns—what is it with Luke and planets with twin suns?—but she presumed that she only had a few hours of daylight left.

The cantina owner was nothing like the friendly Abednedo on Bespin. He was large and muscular with black, oily skin and rows of serrated teeth in his wide mouth. Judging by the lack of a neck, she presumed he was a Herglic. She had met one on Jakku once and wasn’t impressed. The moment she’d wandered inside, the owner had eyed her up and down, and she had a feeling this one wouldn’t impress her much, either.

It was clear from the steep slope of his eyebrows that he had decided he didn’t like Rey as well. His eyes focused on her hip, and she presumed he did not like the lightsaber that was clipped there. Rey had found that most of the individuals she had come across in the short time she had spent in the town did not like her weapon. “Your kind not welcome here,” he said in broken Basic, his hand on his blaster.

“I did not come here for trouble, only information,” she answered. The other patrons of the bar had taken notice of their exchange as soon as she spoke. Her fingers itched to wrap around the hilt of her weapon. “I am looking for a moisture farm.”

Something indecipherable passed over the man’s face, but his hand moved from his weapon. He resumed mixing the alcoholic concoction he had abandoned when she entered. His eyes, however,
never left hers. “Let me guess. Lars homestead?”

“Is that the only moisture farm?”

“No.” She waited for him to say more, but he busied himself finishing the order for another customer. The cup looked tiny in his hand as he stirred the mixture. After he slid the cup across to the waiting H’inemhe, he pressed his palms against the counter, holding Rey’s gaze in a challenge as he spoke again in broken Basic. “Not only moisture farm, but last time unwelcome outsider here, he ask about Lars homestead.”

Every answer he gave Rey only resulted in more questions. Who was the male who had come to the very same cantina? Did he have Sidious, or was he looking for the man that did? Had he received the information he had come for? “What did you say to him?”

“Same thing I say to you. Get hell out of my cantina.”

Rey pulled the Force around her and waved her fingers to aid her suggestion as she gently touched the Herglic’s mind. “You will tell me where to find the Lars homestead.”

“I will tell you where to find the Lars homestead,” he repeated mechanically. His eyes were glazed, not as if he were looking through her, but as if he were entirely unseeing. “Head northwest to outskirts of Jundland Wastes, between Northern Dune Sea and Western Dune Sea. On Great Chott salt flat. Can’t miss tall moisture evaporators. Follow evaporators to pourstone dome at edge of crater. Like I told other guy, not much left after fire. Been abandoned since last war.”

“Thank you,” Rey said, backing out of the cantina. As she stepped out into the alleyway, she could already hear the chatter resume inside. In a few strides, she was back inside the spaceport, climbing into the TIE and setting a northwest course. By the time she had taken off again, the binary suns were low in the sky. If she didn’t find the place before dark, she didn’t want to consider her limited options for shelter.

For endless klicks, the landscape behind her looked the same as the landscape ahead. She wondered if she would even know when she found it, or if she would fly right over it. Gee-Bee was able to find a holomap that labeled the topography the cantina owner described, but, unfortunately, the depictions shared little similarity with the true geographical structures. She stayed the course as best she could, led entirely by hope.
The longer Rey flew, the more she began to realize it was something more than hope. It was almost like a homing beacon, calling to her, guiding her. She believed with certainty that she was flying in the right direction, long before she saw the first moisture evaporator. She knew she was in the right place before the charred pourstone dome came into view. Exhilaration surged through her veins. There was no other ship in view, but she knew Sidious was hidden there. She only hoped no one else was.

Rey set the TIE down on the other side of a rocky ridge from the homestead, where the sand dipped down into a shallow ravine. It was a twenty-minute walk—not that it mattered; she had a slim chance at the element of surprise. She wasn’t kidding herself; she couldn’t sneak up on the dead. The twin ion engines of her fighter were not created for stealth. If anyone was still in the residence, likely they would have heard the scream of the engines on her approach. She hoped that whoever was there would assume she had continued her course if her ship was out of sight. The man who had Sidious was not her enemy; he was trusted by the Alliance with the safety of the galaxy. She had no reason to believe he would react aggressively if he was there. Her life hadn’t afforded her many opportunities to trust strangers or unknown situations, however, so she did what Lando instructed—she made her own luck.

Climbing out of her fighter, she felt something stirring in the Force. It wasn’t a warning, but it was as if the energy around her was…anticipating something. Rey unclipped her lightsaber from her belt as a precaution. Gee-Bee silently followed her through the sand, recognizing that Rey was on edge. The back of the charred dome slowly grew as they approached. It looked…abandoned. There was no sign that anyone had been there in years. She began to wonder if she was wrong—if Sidious hadn’t been hidden there. What if she came all that way for nothing?

Rey’s stomach twisted tighter as she approached the residence. The warm wind swirled around her, pulling at her hair and the cape. With a shudder of anticipation, she ignited her lightsaber. The indigo hue led the way as the twin suns kissed the horizon. With each step, the pull that called to her grew stronger. There was no mistaking it now; the whispers around her left no doubt. She knew she was in the right place. She couldn’t feel the energy, not at that distance, not with the planet’s magnetic field, but she knew.

Sidious was here.

When she was nearly upon the domed structure, there was no mistaking the powerful energy that radiated around her. It was all she could feel in the Force. Sidious. The promise that what she had sought was here was relieving. Her pace quickened; she was impatient to see the Carbonite slab with her own eyes and prove to herself that it was in safe hands. It was almost over. She had no idea what she would do with him, or whether the other man would release him to her, but she had to be there at the end. She had to know he was gone for good.
As Rey rounded the dome to find the entrance, she jerked to a stop. Her droid crashed into the back of her ankles. The first of the twin suns was touching the horizon, casting beautiful shades of orange and red across the sky. But that was not why her heart suddenly thrashed against its cage, why her breath escaped with the breeze and never returned. There was a figure standing at the edge of the nearby crater, a black silhouette against the brilliant colors of the sky. The broad form faced away from her, his hands clasped loosely behind his back as the breeze tousled his hair. The hair, the stature, the way he stood…it all screamed with aching familiarity.

That was not a new revelation for Rey, however. The man in the shadows at the cantina, the new mechanic underneath the X-wing, the man who pushed past her in the corridor, mess hall, or archives…it was always him, until it wasn’t. She saw him everywhere…in everyone.

Often, the reverie would end when the stranger turned, revealing an unfamiliar face; the different eyes were always the first feature she noticed. No one she had ever met had the galaxy contained in their eyes like he had. In the face of disappointment, she would remind herself that she would have known it was him immediately, because she would have felt his Force signature in her soul; she knew it better than she had ever known anything. She had searched, but that familiar energy had never been there. As Rey stepped closer to the man before her, she could feel nothing from him. His energy was weak compared to the overpowering vibration of Sidious in the Force. The familiar energy was missing, just as it always was when she thought she had found him again.

On occasions like this one, the similarities faded only once Rey admitted the truth. Ben was dead. Kylo Ren was out there, but he didn’t want to be found. What were the odds that she would find him at an abandoned moisture farm in the wastelands of Tatooine? The Alliance would have never entrusted him with Sidious, and he would never have chosen there, because he had no ties to it.

There was something, though, calling her to him. Her feet drew her closer, and nothing could quell the voice screaming in her head that she had found the missing piece of her soul. Movement in his hand drew her attention; something dangled from his fingers. The waning light reflected off the twin golden objects, and she realized what they were. It was her gasp that drew his attention. He turned quickly, hand on his weapon, clearly believing that he was alone until that very moment. His lips parted in awe as he took her in.

It was him.

It was the eyes that made her certain this wasn’t an illusion. No matter how often she had attempted to sketch them, even when she imagined him in her memories, she could never quite get the eyes right. Those deep, emotive, venerable eyes now stared back at her, blinking as if she were the illusion. In the span of a lifetime, her wait had been short, but it felt as if it had been years since she had last seen him. Part of her had believed she would never see him again. Rey clasped her free
hand to her mouth, exhaling a long, shuddered breath as she attempted to find the courage to step forward. Her body, her mind, her soul screamed for him. She had to remind herself that it was Kylo, not Ben, who stood before her. Still, she had never been more terrified in her life than in that moment.

Rey didn’t trust her voice to speak. He didn’t seem to be faring much better, his entire body trembling as his eyes bounced between hers, searching desperately for something. She was relieved to find no hatred in his misty gaze.

Despite what he had done, she knew he would find no hatred in her eyes, either. Her heart was laid bare to him. He could crush it again, leave her worse off than the last time he left. All the progress she had made over the past six months would be for naught, but she couldn’t find it in herself to care. She still loved him. Or at least, loved the man he had once been.

His voice cracked when he finally spoke. “Rey?” Her name on his lips stung. She had yearned with all her heart to hear it again, but not from this man. He couldn’t have known what it meant to her.

He looked healthier, younger even, unburdened from the weight of his conflict. He looked almost ethereal in the dimming light. His eyes were brighter, the color warming as she stared at him. The dark circles beneath them had faded, suggesting he had been sleeping better. His hair was shorter as it blew in the breeze, soft waves framing his face. He was dirty—something that seemed incongruous to the man she had once known; fine sand covered his shirt, pants, and the right side of his face. She could barely register his energy in the Force, but even in this moment of shock it was calm and even, nothing like the powerful, conflicted energy she knew so well. His scar—her scar—was her only proof that the man who stood before her was the same man she fell in love with. At least, he had been that man once. “Are you truly here, or is this another illusion?” he whispered.

He would have known if the bond was still intact. If it had been, she would have found him the moment she finished reading his letter. Even standing a few meters apart, however, she felt nothing—not the slightest spark—from the hollow abyss that had been their bond. It was as gone as the soul she had been bonded with. She wondered if he grieved it as she did; if he felt the absence of something he didn’t know existed. “I’m here.”

“How did you find me?” His tone was as unreadable as his eyes, providing her no respite from the fear slowly consuming her since he had left, one single question burning in her throat.

*Are you happy without me?*
Rey reminded herself that she didn’t know this man any more than he knew her. She reminded herself that, *of course, he’s happy without you;* he doesn’t *remember* you. She swallowed past the pain squeezing the breath from her lungs with that realization, focusing instead on answering him. “Poe and I destroyed the *Force Destiny* on Jakku. He told me this was the location where Sidious was hidden, so I came to finish it,” she said, her voice wavering with emotion.

He nodded, chewing on his lip. She could see the tension in his body, the trembling, as if he *wanted* to close the distance between them as much as she did, but he was holding himself back. He just *stared* at her. She wished more than ever that the bond hadn’t been destroyed, just so she could know what he was thinking. It was the first time he had seen her in six months. If he didn’t remember her, was there a part of him that still cared?

His glassy eyes flickered down to her lightsaber and then back to her. There was pain that flashed across his expression. “Do you plan to use that against me?”

“What?” Her sorrow tumbled free from its fetters as she disengaged the lightsaber. “I would never —No, I had no idea you were here. Poe didn’t tell me who took Sidious. I had no idea what I was walking into.”

“Then do you fear me?” His deep voice was strained, heavy with emotion. It reminded her of Ben, *her* Ben, and she was brought back to his last moments before he closed his eyes. She had to remind herself that, as deeply as she craved to have him back, there was still a part of him that was alive, and she would be forever grateful for that.

“How could you ask that…after everything?” Rey asked as she wiped her tears away with quivering fingers.

There was a softness to his voice that she hadn’t heard since the *Finalizer.* “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m a ghost,” he murmured.

Rey shook her head as she scrubbed roughly at the tears continuing to fall. She had wondered what it would be like if she ever saw him again, had imagined what she would say to him. She had never expected it to be this…painful. Being apart, missing him, hurt more than she had ever expected.
Standing in front of the man, when he had no idea who she had been to him, was tormenting. “Because you look like the man I loved, but you’re not him, not anymore. That man’s dead. So to me, I am looking at a ghost.”

He nodded again. The emotions flickering across his eyes passed too quickly to read, but the welling inside them spoke volumes. Their reunion seemed as difficult for him as it was for her. He glanced down at the dice in his palm, fidgeting with them, before he could meet her stare. “Are you happy?”

Rey tried to remain strong, but a sob escaped in response to his words. And then another. How could three simple words be so heartbreaking to hear? It would have been easier in the long run, she suspected, if he had remained indifferent toward her. “Am I happy? What kind of question is that?”

“An honest one,” he said softly as he shifted on his feet. “Your new life on Bespin – I need to know you’re happy.”

Wrapping her arms around herself in comfort, she released a bitter laugh. “What do you need me to say to make you feel better? That I am the happiest I’ve ever been? That I have a job I love? Or do you need to know that I have a place to sleep and I don’t worry where my next meal will come from? Are you worried that I’m alone? Do you want to hear that I have a family who loves me and has supported me through everything? Do you want to hear about my droid? Or are you hoping I’ll tell you about a new man I’ve fallen in love with, so you can be officially absolved from the responsibility of caring? What do you want from me?”

“I have no right to any of it; I know that,” he murmured. “But I didn’t do this to hurt you. And I’m not asking you to forgive me. All I want is to know that you’re happy.”

Wiping at her tears, she stared up at the man who was blinking back his own emotions. “Yes, I’m happy! I love my life in Cloud City! Lando has given me everything I could ever want there. I have Finn and Rose and Poe and Gee-Bee.” She gestured back to the droid, who had thus far remained silent, watching their interaction from a safe distance. “I’ve come a long way from the girl on Jakku; I have everything she ever wanted. But I can’t help looking up at the stars, knowing something is missing.” It felt good to say it, but she realized this wasn’t the man who needed to hear those words. There was no point opening her soul for someone who, as much as she wanted him to be, was not Ben.

“I can’t do this,” she said, turning away. “I can’t be here and miss someone who is standing right in front of me.”
Before she could make it more than a couple of steps, his warm hand grasped her arm. She didn’t know if he had pulled her to him, or she had collapsed in sorrow and he had caught her, but she found herself in his arms, crying against his solid frame. There was a part of her that knew it would be harder to say goodbye, but that didn’t stop her. Being in his arms felt right. It felt like the missing piece of her soul was snapping back into place. She could almost pretend that he was the man who had once loved her, especially with the tender way he held her—arms wrapped firmly around her, face pressed to her hair.

For several long minutes, she allowed herself the comfort of crying in his arms. She cried for the man who had died on the Finalizer, and she cried for the man he had become. Nothing would change that when he was gone. She would feel incomplete again, and she cried for that, too. She cried for the memories they shared and the time that had been stolen from them. She cried because this man had no idea why she was crying.

It was the little things that soothed the ache of the last six months but also reminded her that he was different. Breathing him in, his unique smell was still there, but where he had once smelled like leather, ozone, and recirculated air, he now smelled like fire and soil and salt. Long gone were the tunics and arm guards and heavy material between them. The dark shirt, which wasn’t quite black, allowed the heat of his skin to seep through. The energy she had grown to know so well was muted, the bond missing, but there was one thing about him that was the same. As she pressed her cheek to his chest, she listened to the steady thrum of his heart. Even if this man was Kylo, he still had Ben’s heart. “Force, I’ve missed you so much, Rey,” he murmured. His warm palm was still wrapped around her wrist, and his fingers played with the strip of red fabric tied there. “All this time…you kept it.”

It took a moment before the consequences of his words sunk in. Her eyes snapped open.
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See the end of the chapter for more notes
SIX MONTHS EARLIER, IN A MEDBAY ON BESPIN—

“Goodbye, Kylo.” The young woman’s smile was sad, but he saw the acceptance in her eyes. She
would let him go. When she had barely passed him, she stopped. “Here,” she said, reaching into
her satchel. Placing her hand over his, her skin just grazed his, and he shivered. She dropped two
small, golden chance cubes into his palm. “Your father would want you to have them…for luck.”

A spark of energy passed through him like a lightning bolt. His breath hitched with the intensity of
it.

_For luck._

She didn’t look back as she released his hand and walked out of his life. Or, at least, he didn’t think
she looked back. For all he knew, she could have stopped in the doorway to look at him one final
time, but he was turned away from her. He was focused on the golden dice in his palm, her words
repeating over in his head. _For luck… for luck… for luck…_ Why did she say _those_ words; why
did they sound so familiar? They echoed through the shadows of his mind until they became a
different voice.

_For luck, kid._

_I know that voice…_

There was a vibration from the dice—an energy, like electricity—that pulsated through his fingers.
It was a familiar energy that he was certain he had felt before. Ben saw flashes of memories in his
mind, flashes of memories that he knew were not his. A greying man knelt next to a boy with
chestnut-colored hair, handing the boy the pair of dice before leaving in a crowd. The boy called
after him, but he never turned around.

The boy, older now, hung the golden cubes on his speeder as he raced through the streets of a
planet that Ben was certain he had seen before. He had been there, not with this young boy, but
he had been there. The memory was so close he could almost touch it. This was not his memory, but he knew the people in it weren’t strangers. There was a young girl with brunette hair sitting beside the boy, laughing and smiling. There was no doubt in Ben’s mind that they were in love.

The memory flashed forward again. The boy had become a young man, his visage eerily familiar. He handed the dice to the young brunette woman as she stared at him with uncertainty. “For luck?” she asked the man. “Damn right,” he replied. They were trying to escape someone by way through a checkpoint in a spaceport, but the woman was stopped, and a gate closed between them. The man escaped, the woman did not. Her hand held the dice against the transparent wall between them before she was dragged away.

The memory flashed to the woman, years older, placing the dice back into the man’s palm after striking him with feigned cruelty. She was playing a role, but her message was clear; she believed in him. Ben recognized the darkness, regret, and hopelessness in her eyes, however. Somehow, Ben knew that the story wouldn’t end happily for them.

The man kept the dice and used them in a game of cards Ben was certain he had played before. The man won a ship, the Millennium Falcon. He hung them proudly inside the cockpit. He said it was for luck, but it was also a reminder of who he was and how far he had come. But who was he?

For luck, kid.

It was that voice again, one he knew well. The new memory flashing through his mind wasn’t someone else’s memory. He had seen it before. No, he remembered it. The man knelt before the boy as he handed him those same dice, whispering those achingly familiar words with a smirk.

For luck, kid.

He knew that man.

It was his father. Han Solo.

He knew that boy. It was him.

He remembered. He remembered showing those dice to whoever would listen, telling them how he would become a pilot like his father.
Don’t go! He remembered staring up at the sky as the Millennium Falcon rocketed into the stars, leaving him and broken promises in its wake. He remembered holding onto those dice as he struggled—and failed—to suppress his emotions in the Force.

For luck, his father had said at Luke’s temple as he dropped them in his hand. If you leave, you’re dead to me! He remembered shouting back before throwing those dice at his father’s feet as Han left him behind again.

The next memory was not his, but he remembered where they were. Luke kissed his mother on the forehead as he laid the dice in her palm. No one’s ever really gone.

He remembered kneeling on the floor after his failure on Crait. His uncle was dead, he had nearly killed everyone else in his anger, and she had left him for the second time in one day. He had lost everything. All that remained were the consequences of what he’d done, as even his father’s dice disappeared between his fingers.

He remembered when he found the dice on the Falcon as he prepared to take down the First Order. Poe Dameron had asked him his name. Ben Solo.

He remembered the escape craft, the feel of the cool aurodium contrasting the warmth of her hand under his palm. He remembered his last breath, when he tried to stay with Rey. He refused to go with his mother, and as his hand loosened and the cubes fell to the floor, he found himself connected to the dice instead of fading into the Force. He remembered death.

Ben remembered everything, even memories that had once been torn apart by a monster long ago.

Most importantly, he remembered her.

“Rey?”

Ben burst through the blastdoor, spinning to find his bearings. He couldn’t feel the Force, or the bond, but he didn’t care. He was alive, he was alive, and in…in a bright corridor. One wall contained an endless row of doors, and the other wall contained transparentsteel viewports looking out upon the clouds. Bespin. Further down the corridor, a familiar form was leaving the medbay. His heart fluttered in excitement.
“Rey!” She had already stepped through the transparensteel doors, but he could still see her. She moved quickly, radiating determination and strength with her head held high. It didn’t surprise him; she had suffered greatly in her life and stood tall through it all. Picking up his pace to catch up to her, he darted around med droids and hovering carts of supplies. Nothing would stop him from getting to her and begging her forgiveness.

“Ben Solo!”

He turned to find the entire bay had stopped to stare at the short humanoid woman standing in the corridor. He would have ignored her and apologized later, but there was something arresting in her eyes. It made him uneasy. Maz smiled. “It is you, isn’t it? I knew you would come around eventually.”

“It was my father’s dice…when I died, I didn't want to go with my mother into the Force. I was holding those dice, so I spent all of my remaining energy to project myself into them. Or at least a part of myself. I don't know what happened; I ended up in a place in between. I thought it was the only way to stay with her, the only way I could watch over her. I didn’t think I could…come back. When she said goodbye, there was energy, and it transferred and…I’m here. I’m alive. I have to find Rey, I have to—”

“You have to think about what you’re about to do very carefully, young Solo. Come,” she said, walking into an empty room. Ben took one last look over his shoulder, disappointed to find that Rey was no longer in sight. Reluctantly, he obeyed and followed Maz into the room. Lando, Finn, and Poe Dameron were waiting for them there. This was…not a good sign. Maz gestured to a chair across from the admiral, and Ben sat stiffly.

Maz joined Lando on the far side of the room. Finn leaned against the wall beside his superior. Dameron sat across from him in a visitor's chair, his elbows on his knees, staring at Ben. They sat that way for a moment, and Dameron never broke eye contact.

"So...who talks first..." Ben quipped, trying to lighten the heaviness in the air. He may not have had the Force, but he knew it was still there. He could almost feel the phantom energy, like a missing limb. Dameron smiled at the memory, though it never reached his eyes.

"I never thought I'd have the chance to sit across from Kylo Ren and possess the authority to return the fine hospitality I was treated with when I was imprisoned onboard the Finalizer," he admitted in a way that wasn’t entirely joking.
"To be honest, admiral, this room is not adequately equipped with the torture devices fit for a man charged with crimes of war," Ben replied. Dameron studied him, trying to determine if his comment was serious. It was. Though the admiral had spoken at length with him about the council’s decision to stay his execution, that was before he had recovered his memories. For all he knew, it could change everything. In fact, Dameron had mentioned the loss of his memories as the reason behind the council issuing the stay. The only comfort was that, if he was to be executed, he would go to his death remembering his love for Rey.

The others remained silent, their attention on the man sitting across from him. Evidently, they were there for support or in case the conversation turned violent. This really didn't look good for him. Dameron didn’t break eye contact, and he wondered what he was thinking. His expression wasn’t exceptionally loathing, but after what Ben had done to him, he doubted there were many other emotions he could be feeling. "Is that how you see yourself...a war criminal?"

"I think my actions would fit that definition, yes," Ben said, looking down at the hands that had caused everyone around him pain. He didn’t need to mention Hosnian Prime; they all knew the extensive crimes he had committed in the name of revenge.

"I think the actions of Kylo Ren would, but that is not who I have in front of me, is it?" Dameron suggested, his words achieving their intended effect by forcing Ben to glance back up at him. “Because in my mind, Ben Solo was necessary in the dismantling and destruction of the First Order. Ben Solo renounced the First Order and its agenda. Ben Solo, after assassinating the Supreme Leader to spare the life of a member of the Resistance, assumed the throne and was instrumental in maintaining the secrecy of the location of the Resistance. Ben Solo, after being shot down as an enemy and deserter of the First Order, was able to infiltrate the Finalizer under false pretenses, evade capture, secure the Resistance prisoners, seize the bridges, disable the entire fleet's defense systems, eliminate the threat of Darth Sidious to the galaxy and willingly sacrifice his own life for the cause. The Resistance would have failed and suffered heavy casualties without Ben Solo's bravery. That is the truth, and that is what was written in the report. That has to count for something, right?"

Though it technically wasn’t a lie, it oversimplified something far more complicated. Ben remembered a conversation he had once with Rey in her temple room. He had told her details and sentiments are forgotten over time. Morality and ethics become muddled. Righteousness becomes the judgment of the narrator. So whether right now, in this time, the group of anarchists you call the Resistance view me as the enemy is inconsequential. He hadn’t meant those words as they applied now, but they had become truth. Dameron could make the holobooks reflect whatever narrative he wanted. That was the privilege afforded to the victors. Ben didn’t know how he felt about it now that it benefitted him.

Dameron looked to Finn, scratching the back of his head. "And although I still hate you more than you will ever know...I’m not doing this for me. I’m doing this for Rey, because I should have trusted her in the first place.”
“You did what you thought was right at the time. It’s war,” Ben said, and for the first time the admiral and the former Supreme Leader shared a mutual understanding—the lines between right and wrong are easily blurred on the battlefield, when one had everything to lose and the only goal was to win.

Dameron considered Ben for a moment, then nodded. “I'm doing this for her, but I’m also doing this for Leia, who was the wisest and most forgiving person I have ever met. She was like a second mother to me. And I know this is what she would have wanted.” He sighed as he stared at Ben, who swallowed the pain of hearing the admiral mention his mother.

Dameron continued, "I have been offered the permanent position of Admiral of the Alliance Fleet, and with that comes certain authority as the RSA rebuilds. One such authority is complete control and discretion over the criminals in my charge, including war criminals. The council has already voted for a stay of execution and agreed to the sentence I proposed. If the circumstances change, well, that decision falls to me. It is my assumption that you’ve recovered your memories?"

There was no point in lying. “Yes.”

“The Force?”

It was oddly distressing to admit that a significant part of him was gone. He shook his head instead of giving life to the words.

“Then I think the sentence is obvious.” Dameron was staring down at hands, impossible to read.

Ben tapped his knuckles on the chair as he found the courage to ask the question that determined his fate. “And that is?”

“As far as Kylo Ren is concerned—death.” Ben hardened his face as he accepted the news. He didn’t care about himself, but he knew Rey would be devastated. He could give her a proper goodbye this time, he thought, making certain he said everything that needed to be said. It was a chance that better men—men like his father—had not been afforded. His ringing ears muted the admiral’s voice, but he was snapped back to reality when Finn shoved a datapad into his hands. It was a holonews article. The headline read,

*Kylo Ren confirmed dead.*
His eyes quickly scanned the remainder of the article.

**CLOUD CITY, Bespin (GP) – Former Supreme Leader of the First Order, Kylo Ren, was confirmed dead this morning by Republic Systems Alliance officials. In the aftermath of the Battle of Ilum, and subsequent surrender of the First Order Fleet, details of his capture have been scarce. The Resistance played a role in the capture of the former Supreme Leader, according to officials, who discussed his early morning death on the condition of anonymity due to the involvement of sensitive operations and intelligence.**

The Resistance was founded by Rebellion hero and former New Republic senator General Leia Organa, who was succeeded by Admiral Poe Dameron upon her passing earlier this year. Admiral Dameron was directly responsible for the coordination of the Republic Systems Alliance prior to the Battle of Ilum.

Rumors circulated by former First Order stormtroopers who sought asylum on Bespin suggest the young Jedi hero known only as "Rey," who catapulted to fame following her role in the Battle of Ilum, may have been directly or indirectly responsible for the death of the former Supreme Leader. The Jedi was not made available for comment. Officials, however, were quick to deny those rumors, in addition to rumors that the war criminal had been executed by the Alliance.

One source hinted at the notoriously lethal Blue Shadow Virus as the cause of Kylo Ren’s death while in Alliance custody. When questioned, the source assured the Galactic Press that the highly infectious disease posed “absolutely no risk of transmission or threat to the public,” suggesting the virus had been used in biological warfare designed to specifically target high-ranking officials of the First Order. A press conference set for....

The words blurred out of focus, but Ben continued staring for a few moments before breathing the word. “Dead?”

Dameron hadn’t looked up from his hands. Ben didn’t know if it was because he feared Ben’s reaction or hated him too much to look at him. “As far as the galaxy is concerned, yes,” Dameron answered.

“Blue Shadow Virus?”

Dameron chuckled, rubbing his hands together. “Was that not a good enough death for the Supreme Leader?”
“I thought the way I actually died was a good-enough death,” Ben said quietly. It was difficult to admit. He had died. Remembering what Rey had experienced when he had lost his memories was nothing compared to what he knew she suffered because he failed her. There was nothing that would ever make him leave her again.

“Too heroic for the likes of Kylo Ren,” Dameron mumbled. Finn wordlessly took the datapad from him, dragging Ben back to the present.

Ben hummed. He supposed his viewpoint on the death they had chosen for him was moot. Dead men didn’t get a say in the legacy others attributed to them, and he never expected his to be a good one. He was lucky enough to live to see it. “What does this mean for Rey? For me? What now?”

“Kylo Ren is dead; Ben Solo is an outlaw that helped save the galaxy. He deserves a more… judicious sentence.”

“And that is?” Ben asked as emotionlessly as he could manage, as if he wasn’t awaiting his fate.

“Hold on, I’ve got it right here,” Dameron answered as Finn handed his admiral the datapad, which displayed an official-looking page with a Republic Systems Alliance letterhead. Ben steeled himself. This was it; this was his fate. “Ben Solo, it is the judgment of the council of the Republic Systems Alliance that your sentence for the crimes specified above will be as follows—time served with immediate exile due to exigent circumstances of memory loss, deterioration of Force abilities, and critical involvement in the fall of a tyrannical regime,” Dameron paused, staring up at Ben. Memory loss. The implication was clear. The admiral had no intention of revealing that Ben had regained his memory.

Ben nodded once in understanding.

Dameron continued. “…under the condition that you never hold another position of power in a political or military organization for as long as you live. You must also maintain honest employment and surrender all capital obtained under the service of the First Order to the Hosnian System Victim Relief fund. If you accept, you will be hereby exiled from the Core Worlds and systems protected by the Republic Systems Alliance. Per penal code 147 section 34E of galactic law, all parole candidates convicted of capital crimes are to be fitted with subdermal implants equipped with Galactic Positioning System. You will be required to attend annual parole hearings with the council as well as periodic assessments with yours truly. Re-offense of galactic peacetime laws, such as murder, will result in the termination of your parole and a mandatory death sentence.”
Exile. After years of the voices in his head convincing him he could never live without the Order, it seemed impossible. The weight on his shoulders melted away as he imagined a life where he could be free—no voices, no master, no conflict, no shadow of legends, just him. He could have a second chance at the life he had only ever dreamed of. His immediate desire was to run to Rey, to tell her they could be together, to thank her for believing in a fate he couldn’t see until that moment. He couldn’t remember the last time he had held such an optimistic view of the future. Ben raised his eyes slowly to meet Dameron’s. He nodded. "I do not take the judgment lightly, Admiral. I will obey the conditions of the parole. You have my word, which may not mean a lot to you, but it is all I have."

“Solo, for your sake, you better keep your word,” the admiral warned. “The implant is injected at the base of your skull into the vertebrae. It cannot be destroyed or electronically altered or removed while you’re alive. If you go rogue, it will kill you. It will detonate and sever your spinal column. Death is swift. The implant is fitted with old Hutt technology used for slaves, with one alteration—a fail-safe to protect you from unlawful retaliation by enemies within the Alliance. If you do go rogue, the ‘kill switch’ can only be activated simultaneously by two of the three responsible parties. Those responsible parties will designate confidential secondary parties should they be… incapable of fulfilling their duties.”

“I’m assuming you are one of the responsible parties?”

“Due to…personal biases, it would be a conflict of interest for me to be a responsible party. But the council did accept the recommendation for the three responsible parties I suggested.” The admiral didn’t reveal the names of the three parties, but he didn’t have to. As his eyes met the three other individuals in the room, who had otherwise been silent during the conversation, Ben quickly understood why they were there.

“You three?” he said more than asked Finn, Maz, and Lando.

“It’s not a decision we took likely,” Lando said.

“We believe in you, child; we did it to protect you,” Maz added. “No one beyond this room will know.”

Finn looked down at his feet. “I did it for Rey. I knew she would trust me over anyone else to never betray you…which I’m sure sounds crazy right now, considering you called me ‘traitor.’”
“You betrayed the Order,” Ben said, “not me. It just took me a little longer understand that…and even longer to betray them. I trust you, Finn. I trust all of you.” Relief soothed the tension as the others smiled in response. The sentence was more than fair considering the severity of his crimes. He was exiled with a deathchip, but he was a free man. “Does Rey know?”

It wasn’t Dameron who answered. “I think this is where I come in,” Maz said. “You boys can take your leave now.”

“Wait,” Ben said before either man could leave the room. “Inside the casing on the hilt of Rey’s lightsaber is a datacard. To my knowledge, she has no idea that it’s there. On that datacard there are holomaps, military strategies, recent and past operations, weapon concepts, financial records, secret programs, sensitive and confidential information concerning anyone and everyone involved with the First Order. It has everything the highest level of security clearance could obtain. It will take months for a team to comb through it all, but you’ll find everything you need, including coordinates to where they are repairing the Supremacy and other destroyers. I think the location of the remaining Force Destiny is in there somewhere, in financial records or past operations if you look hard enough.”

“When did you hide it in her lightsaber?”

“When she asked me to help her fix it,” Ben said with a shrug. “I thought she’d find it when she built her new one, but she must have thought it was a vital component. She left it in her new one.” When he had first seen the new weapon, he had panicked, but he had sensed it there in the Carbonite room. He wondered how long it would have stayed hidden if he died. “With the scanners, they would have known if I left my room with it. She was the only way I could get it off the Finalizer.”

Poe scratched at his jaw in either confusion or irritation, perhaps a mixture of both. “I don’t understand. What was your plan when she found it? She could have given it to me like she did the vial.”

“I was counting on it,” Ben grinned remorsefully. “I figured Hux would have killed me for the throne by then. Blue had orders—where is Blue?”

“Rose just finished replacing his broken drives. It was only the memory drives that were affected. I’ll go find him after this,” Dameron promised. “You said Blue had orders?

It took Ben a moment to sort through both the relief of finding that Blue was okay and the remorse that the droid wouldn’t remember him before he could drag his mind back to the conversation. I
gave Blue orders… “Right, to contact the Millennium Falcon on Master Comms in the event of mutiny and disclose the location of that datacard. It would have been your only chance against them.”

“Why didn’t you just leave?”

“I thought I couldn’t without putting the Resistance at risk,” he said. “If I left, there would be no one to stop them from finding Dantooine. Besides, where would I have gone?”

“You knew about Dantooine?” The admiral’s tone didn’t sound nearly as fearful or accusatory as Ben had expected.

“He was the one who gave me the coordinates,” Maz chuckled. Dameron stared at Maz and then Ben in disbelief.

“Ironic, isn’t it?” Ben huffed in an attempt to break the heaviness he could practically feel around him. “You had…everything you needed to destroy the First Order and end the war right there with Rey the entire time.”

The look on Dameron’s face was stoic, but there was something else in his eyes, a knowing look that bordered on playful. “That I did.” He slapped Ben on the back, then grasped his shoulder with more effort than he likely needed to. “Before you go, meet me at my office.” He released Ben’s shoulder and made to leave but hesitated at the door. He turned, scratching the back of his neck. “Uh, I never thought I would be standing here, talking to you like this, but I made a promise, so here it goes: your mother wanted me to tell you that she loved you and she was sorry.” Ben bit his lip to suppress the tears threatening to fall. Before he could thank the man, Poe left the room without another word.

With a heavy exhale, Ben forced himself to focus on the matter at hand and turned to Finn. “Here.” He reached into his boot and removed a small, black datacard. He held it up until Finn’s eyes focused on his. “This contains the files of every recruit that was stolen or purchased for the stormtrooper program. As part of the recruiting process, they did an entire physical, psychological and background evaluation to ensure loyalty. This will have the record of your former name, family history, and homeworld. Think it through; you can’t unlearn that knowledge, but do with it what you need to.”

Finn nodded and carefully plucked the datacard from his outstretched fingers. “Thank you for…you know…all of it,” he said, rubbing at the back of his neck. “I guess it’s a good thing I took it easy on you on Starkiller, huh?” he joked, grinning in a way that seemed effortless.
Ben huffed. “Good thing.”

After Finn left, Ben turned to Maz. “Exile. That’s good news, right? Does Rey know?”

Maz’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “Not yet, child, but don’t worry. If you ask her to join you, as you did in the throne room, this time she will say yes. She loves you; she wouldn’t leave you again,” she assured him, but that didn’t settle the growing foreboding he felt, “even if that requires giving up everything to choose you.”

There it was, the reality the little voice inside his head had been trying to warn him. She would go with him, but would she be happy in the long run? Exile was a blessing to him, but it would be a punishment to her. She should be free to experience anything and everything life could offer her. Since she left Jakku, she had been bonded with him. Everything in her life had been thrust upon her, not chosen. He knew he loved her, because he had never felt anything toward anyone else before. But she never had that chance. She never had a chance to know her ambitions and desires; she never got to know a normal life beyond him.

And he…would he ever know for certain that she was happy if she never had a chance to find an identity on her own, if she never had space and time beyond her imprisonment on Jakku, the war, their bond, and her desire to save him to discover what she wanted most in life? What if—after saving him and settling into a normal life—her priorities changed? What if she wanted things he couldn’t give her in exile?

Would he ever know for certain that she loved him if she never had the chance to love someone better? Someone who could have taken her to every planet she had ever wanted to see, someone she could have had a normal life with? What kind of life did he imagine for her? Was it another life on a desolate planet in the Outer Rim? Because that was what he could offer her. If it was his choice, he knew it wasn’t the life she deserved. But it needed to be her choice. And she couldn’t make an informed choice. Not yet.

Rey could have everything she had ever wanted on Bespin. Her family was there. He knew Lando would find her a job in the hangar. She would have a home of her own, and she would have food and belonging and a peaceful life. If he stood there and asked her to choose between him and everything else she loved, she would do it. But could he do that to her?

Tears welled in his eyes.
He knew what he had to do, but did he have the strength to do it?

They had been through so much terrible suffering to be together; could he just walk away? He loved her. He would give up everything to be with her. But he couldn’t stay on Bespin, not until the Alliance found a new interim capitol. It could be six months to a year….

“My parole hearing, the next one is in a year?” His voice broke under the weight of what he was suggesting.

Maz smiled and nodded, adjusting her goggles. “There you are, Ben Solo. I see a man who has his father’s heart, indeed. The hardest lesson any of us have ever learned in love is letting go. And it looks to me like you just learned it. Wherever your mother is, she’s smiling. I guarantee you that, boy.”

He nodded through tears. “How will you stop her from coming after me? The second she discovers I remember—” His voice fell away as the implications crashed over him like a rogue wave. “She won’t know about my memories, will she?”

Maz’s expression was unreadable, but she shook her head as she repeated her earlier assertion. “Only the people that were inside this room will know the truth unless you tell her, young Solo.”

Rey would start a new life believing a lie, and he would have to tell it. He had allowed her to believe a lie before; if this was best for her, then he could do it again. He loved her that much. “She already said goodbye,” he said, the realization of what he had to do burning in his eyes. “As long as she doesn’t know, she can move forward.”

This…this would hurt worse than dying. He could feel the pain settling in his chest already, counterbalanced only by his love for her. “She’ll hate me for this.” Ben exhaled slowly to fight the tears that threatened to spill over into his voice. “She’ll hate me for leaving her. What if she doesn’t go to the parole hearing? Am I doing the right thing?”

“You both have some growing to do,” Maz replied. “And healing to boot. You’ve come a long way, Ben Solo, but you still have work to do. And we can only hope that when Rey is in a better place emotionally, she will understand that what you are about to do for her is entirely out of love.”

It was enough. He had hope. And that was why he knew he had to leave before he lost his courage. Love wasn’t selfish; he couldn’t be selfish again, no matter how painful it would be to
leave her. Even if she never wanted to see him again, he had to do the right thing. For her. “I should go,” he said as he wiped the emotion from his cheeks.

“I guess that’s where I come in,” Lando said. “My offer still stands. We’ve all agreed that the Falcon should be yours. Go find yourself for a little while, and when the time comes, you can work for me delivering aid to war-torn systems until you decide what you want to do with your life.”

“Why?” he asked as he slowly stood to face his father’s best friend. “Why would you give me the Falcon after what I’ve done?”

“Look, I hate it, I wish I could change it, but…I accept it. What’s done is done; what matters is where we go from here,” he said with a seriousness Ben rarely saw in his uncle. “He’d want you to have it, kid. He loved that ship, but I’ve never seen him love anything as much as he loved you. I know heforgives you, Ben, because I forgive you. That’s love. You’ll always be my nephew; it’s my job to look out for you. Besides, if I didn’t, he’d come back just to blast me in the left ass cheek.”

Ben chuckled, because it was exactly what he would imagine his father doing. “And he’d do it with a cocky smirk on his face,” he agreed. Then it hit him, as it did every time he thought about his father. I did this. I’m the reason he isn’t here. I killed him. That, coupled with what he was about to do, left him drowning in emotions. His lip quivered as the tears began to well again, and he turned away to hide the pain that was likely plain on his face. It was time to go; he was never any good with goodbye anyway.

Before he could leave, a warm hand squeezed his shoulder. “He’d be proud of you, son.”

Ben nodded stiffly. When Lando released him, he followed his feet to the door. The older man’s voice stopped him in the doorway. “Ben!” He didn’t turn around, but they both knew he was listening. “Don’t be a stranger, you hear?”

“Yes, Uncle.”
Chapter End Notes

Discussion of death
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Rey trembled. The temperature on Tatooine seemed to have lost all its warmth as the twin suns disappeared beyond the horizon. “I kept what?” she breathed, tilting her head to search his eyes. Ben seemed genuinely shocked when she pushed herself out of his embrace, her entire body trembling in anticipation. “All this time I kept what?”

The apple of his throat bobbed apprehensively. Her heart thrummed harder because she found recognition in his eyes. He knew what she was asking him. “This,” he said, his fingers wrapping around the material at her wrist. “The piece of my cloak I tied in your hair.”

“You,” she swallowed. She feared giving voice to the words; she feared having hope. “You remember that?”

He nodded.

She exhaled shakily. “What else do you remember?” He quietly studied her for a moment, working his jaw.

There was a howling in the Force around her, but it didn’t drown out the screaming in her mind. Just tell me! His next words could change their lives—they both knew that—but all he could do was stare at her. “Please,” she whispered.

“Everything.”

His words crashed into her harder than the wall of snow in the avalanche. Her hand to flew to her mouth in disbelief. Rey searched his eyes, his face, for the truth and found only honesty. It was everything she had dreamt of for months, torturing herself with the ”what ifs.” All at once, she couldn’t breathe. “No, you can’t,” she gasped in air as she tried to steady her spiraling emotions. “You can’t just say something like that; you can’t give people hope like that. What do you mean ‘everything?’”

“You would kill me. Knowing nothing about me?” Those are the first words I remember saying to you in the forest of Takodana. And I remember my last words to you on that escape craft. ‘I’ll come back to you, sweetheart, I promise.’ I remember that, with my last breath, I tried to stay with you, so my soul ended up connected to these,” he lifted his open palm, the dice reflecting the last
orange rays of light. “I remember when you gave them back. ‘For luck,’ you said, and there was this spark, and I remembered my father saying that to me as a kid. Then…I remembered everything else…and realized I was alive.”

“Ben?” It was a name she never thought she would say to him again.

His warm hand came up to caress her cheek as he smiled gently. “It’s me, sweetheart.” Her knees buckled as the weight of his words settled over her. Collapsing to the ground in a heap of emotions, she allowed the sobs to come. He followed her down to the ground, holding her against him. He was warm and alive and real under her fingertips. All she could do was cry, repeating his name over and over. With her fingers fisting the material of his shirt tightly, she refused to let him go as her pain, her yearning, and her unfettered love poured out with her tears.

Ben was real and warm underneath her. His chest expanded and contracted against her cheek, the sound of his heartbeat thrumming strongly in her ears. The bond was gone, but the Force around her still vibrated with the intense connection between them. The familiarity of his energy soothed the deepest sorrows of her soul. She squeezed him tighter, but then she realized how tense his muscles were.

She had begged for this moment; she had convinced herself it was impossible. Her thoughts were rattled with fears that it was a dream or an illusion or a manipulation of the Force. It couldn’t possibly be real. After forcing herself to face her denial and accept that he had died, then accept that he was someone else, it was difficult to have hope again. There was a profound conflict she felt in accepting the truth. It would kill her if it wasn’t real. But the steady vibrations in the Force assured her. Her relentless prayers had been answered. This was Ben.

*Her Ben.*

Her entire body shook in the aftermath of the reawakening of her long-dead hope. It was overwhelming. Long ago, she had been the one to forget him and leave him alone. When they met for the first time since she erased her memories, it must have been difficult for him to realize she didn’t remember him. She didn’t know how he had been so calm as he found that hope again. How had he been so strong when she didn’t remember him? How had he not fallen apart when he saw her again?

Her entire world had been upended in the best way. She felt like either crying until she passed out from exhaustion…or sleeping for the next week…or staying awake for the next week instead, to ensure he was never out of her sight. Ben wasn’t faring much better, his body trembling as violently as hers as he grasped her with a desperation that she hadn’t felt in him since he died.
All she could manage to say through her tears was, “You’re really here? You’re okay? You’re alive?”

Ben was shaking so intensely that it was difficult to feel his fervent nodding. Bowing his head, he whispered into her hair, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, Rey. I love you so much.”

One minute she was the happiest she had ever been, drying her tears, promising the Cosmic Force that she would never ask for anything ever again, and the next, something just…snapped inside her. The dam that contained her tremendous grief - grief that consumed her when she believed him to be dead, and the months after when she believed he was all but dead to her – crumbled under the words she believed she would never hear again. She pulled away from him as her tears of joy were replaced by tears of heartbreak.

“You’re sorry? You love me?” Tears blurred her vision as she searched the eyes that had haunted her dreams for months. “Then why did you leave me?” Ben was silent as he stared back at her, his pained eyes revealed the torment he had suffered as well. Ben could have said a million things to placate her, but he swallowed his words and waited for her to continue. He knew what he had done – to them both.

*Ben* was there with her – which was a miracle in itself – and nothing she said would change the past, but it felt good to release everything she had silenced for so long. Begging a dead man for answers was futile, but he was here now, she had the chance she never thought would be granted. They may not have been the answers she wanted to hear, but she needed this. She needed this from him. Her voice wavered as she begged him for answers that her heart already knew. “Did you plan to go down with that destroyer?”

He nodded once. “I saw it in visions.”

“Why didn’t you *tell* me, Ben?” She wiped her tears away trying in vain to stay as strong as she had been the last six months. “Instead of deceiving me into believing you were on the *Falcon* with me?”

His hands reached forward to grasp hers. Kneeling before her, he stared at her with eyes wet and remorseful. His voice was beseeching her to understand. “I didn’t know how much I needed your help, any of you. I just wanted you to be safe from my mistakes.”

“Why did you…” The sorrow suddenly cracked through her voice, drowning her words, because his hands were *warm* in hers. In her time without him, she thought she had confronted the trauma surrounding his death, but his physical presence forced her to relive the horrors of that day. It was
extraordinary how effortlessly she could remember the unnatural, cold lifelessness of his hands as if she was still holding him on the floor of that escape craft. He had died. If fate had been crueler, she could have just as easily been sobbing to his ghost… or the empty space he had once occupied. Every single emotion she had kept pent up since the Finalizer bubbled to the surface and was released in her sobs. “Why did you sacrifice yourself when you knew how much I loved you?”

Ben’s chin quivered as he pressed his lips together, trying in vain to swallow a sob. A tear cut down his face; transparent, unlike the last time she had seen him cry. The release of his own sorrow was silent at first, only the soft bounce of his shoulders was evidence that he had been swept fully under the weight of his emotions as well. “I had to do it, Rey,” he managed between quiet sobs. “To save the galaxy.”

The breeze of the impending desert night swept over them, cooling the tears on her face, the harsh temperature biting at her skin, until the tears became another reminder of the pain she had endured. “Why did you break our bond?”

As her words settled into the distance between them, his face twisted with another wave of sorrow. He exhaled a shuddering breath. “To save you.”

Ben looked like he was physically injured, his remorse cutting him deeper than a blade ever could. It hurt her to see his pain, but she needed answers, and he needed to understand just what he had done to them. “You…died. You were gone. Do you have any idea what that did to me?”

Ben chewed his lip as he nodded through tears. Did he? Did he have any idea what it had been like to lose him? To hold his lifeless body and come to terms with the fact that she would never hold him again? To search the empty space in her mind that he had once been and know that half of her soul was missing? To hold the nothingness he left behind and feel the ache of his loss like a black hole where her heart had been, its gravity pulling her down into darkness? To face moving forward without him, fearing the moment she forgot another memory? To watch him say goodbye on holovideo and believe that was the last time she would ever hear his voice? To only have a scrap of cloth to remember him by? To feel the desperation that she would have crawled through the fires of Mustafar to bring him back? No, he couldn’t know that hell.

There was something in his eyes, however, that reminded her that he had lost her too. He may have taken comfort in the fact that she lived, but he was existing without half of his soul as well. His head fell forward, his shoulders slumped as his sobs strengthened. “Losing you – it was the worst pain I’ve ever felt. I’m so sorry, Rey….” His voice broke on her name, grasping onto her as if she were the one who had taken her last breath in his arms.

Ben stayed on his knees in supplication, head bowed, pain and remorse etched in his features. She withdrew her hands from his warm grasp and he let her go. He didn’t flinch, didn’t glance up at her
or ask her why. It was almost as if he expected her to leave him. “Ben.” She cupped his cheeks, grounding her spiraling emotions by satisfying her need to touch him, to prove he was real, to run her fingers over the familiar expressions she was quickly relearning. “I was so broken without you… you know that, don’t you? Part of me died with you.”

He nodded through another wave of sorrow. As she slid her thumbs soothingly back and forth over his cheeks, her eyes trailed from his lips to his scar to his beautiful moles to his pained eyes that held so much love within them. That love – it had been both been her salvation and damnation in their time apart. In the six months without him, she had found comfort in her friends, she had lived a life that would have made him proud. She had found herself in many ways.

But that pain derived from the love she once held for him – that she still held for him – left her treading water. She had never progressed forward into acceptance because she had never wanted to let him go. It had been tormenting to be separated on opposite sides of a war, but it was nothing compared to what she suffered in his absence. There was no amount of anger or sorrow or heartache that would make her want to be anywhere but right there with the man she loved. The Force has taken him away from her, but it had given him back. Twice. Rey fell apart in his arms, collapsing forward into the warmth of his chest as he wrapped his arms around her. “You’re here,” she repeated, trying to convince herself that her suffering had ended, “you died, Ben, you were gone, but you’re here.”

“I tried to stay with you, Rey,” he breathed into her hair. “And you… you brought me back. You saved me in every way a person could.”

“But you gave up!”

Ben shook his head. “I never gave up, because I knew you’d never give up on me.” He pulled her tighter against him and she twisted her hand into his shirt, grasping onto him as much as she grasped onto the words she repeated into his chest. You gave up, you gave up, you gave up. Her words devolved into heavy sobs when she felt his steady heartbeat under her palm. He wrapped his hand around hers as he had done just before he died. It conjured images of his final moments, and the loneliest moments of her life that followed. Ben kept her from crumbling to the floor as she shuddered in his arms. He’s here, she reminded herself. He’s alive. She gasped in breaths, leaning against him in exhaustion.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I’m so sorry.”

This was everything she had begged for six months ago as she held his broken body. It still didn’t seem possible – that she would ever hold him again. That Ben was there with her, that he remembered. Although Rey had known he was out there in the galaxy the last six months, to her, the man she loved died on the bottom of that escape craft.
“But you did give up,” she repeated softly. “You did.” For six months, he had allowed her to believe that. He had left her behind and that hurt more than anything. She pulled herself out of his arms and stood on shaky legs, wrapping her arms around herself. She had been so very angry at him when he first left. With time, the anger faded. But the despair from being left behind had stayed. The words left unspoken refused to remain fettered in torturous silence. Her heart had been broken for six months. Needlessly, she had only recently discovered. A fresh wave of tears blurred her vision. She felt so alone. Other than the shivering words and the gasps between sobs, her voice was surprisingly even for the significance of the subject. “You gave up on us, Ben. You remembered me, but you didn’t stay. You flew away on your ship; you didn’t give me a choice, you just left me...” Her words broke under the weight of her misery, “like they left me. You never once told me you remembered. Or cared. All you left was a note. And after I tore it up and drenched it in fire-water, I barely had that anymore, I had nothing to—”

“Fire-water?” His tone was grief-stricken, and his expression was worse. She knew he didn’t want that for her; it was part of the reason she stopped.

She nodded, drying her tears with the back of her hands. “I had to make the pain go away.” Her face was wet with sorrow, her heart ached, but all she wanted was to reach for him. “You told me I would never be alone.”

“I explained in the note, I asked you to meet me at my hearing,” he said. His tone was soft but pleading. His eyes were wet, but she sensed no remorse. How can you be so calm?! Why don’t you care?! Why did you leave me?!

Rey was having none of his explanations. He had sentenced them both to suffer, needlessly. “An entire year, Ben! You died, and you wanted me to wait a year to see you again! Why? I don’t understand. Do I…” Her voice broke, but she forced herself to remain strong. “Do I mean nothing to you!?”

Her last words sparked a fiery turmoil in Ben’s eyes. He pushed himself to a stand with a ferocity she hadn’t seen in him since he was the Supreme Leader. “You mean everything to me!” he shouted through tears, his voice wavering under the weight of his emotion. “The last thing I ever wanted to do was leave, but I had to.”

“Why,” she cried. “Why did you have to leave me.”

“What I did in the throne room…I couldn’t do that to you again. That’s why I gave you a choice and the chance to make it! No bond, no war, no need to save me. You were surrounded by family so you wouldn’t be alone. I am sentenced to exile, Rey, and I couldn’t stand there and ask you to
give up everything and choose me.” She had almost forgotten how physically imposing he could be, how compelling and intense his eyes could become in their passionate depths. She had seen others cower in his presence, but she knew him. She would never fear him, even as his emotions raged like a storm in his stare.

Ben hesitated, studying her, as if he expected her to fear him. When he spoke again, his tone was soft but sad. “I gave you a way out, no other reason to see me again unless you wanted it. I gave you space without me, to decide on your own. I gave you a place to find me, if, after that year, you still loved me. I also gave you time to meet someone...someone better, who could give you the normal life that you deserve.” His shoulders rose and fell with each ragged breath, his own suffering from those months glistening in his eyes. “And you did meet someone, or at least, gave him a chance at love. You have Dameron and your family and your life on Bespin. You’re happy now.” A tear bisected the other side of his face as he struggled to swallow his emotions. “So, I’m sorry for everything else, but not for leaving. You never needed anyone to come back for you, Rey; you’ve always been strong enough to find happiness on your own.”

Rey didn’t know what else to do; she turned and fled. In the waning light, she ran toward her fighter with her droid close behind. Ben didn’t move to follow her. It hurt. He spoke as if he didn’t care what choice she made. For all the pain she felt losing him, imagining what it would be like when he returned, she had never wondered if Ben truly loved her. Even in his darkness, he had stood before her and begged her to join him. Why wouldn’t he do it again in the light, after everything they had been through?

She had saved him, but he forgot her. He had his memories back, but then he left her. And now, even when they had found each other again, he was distant. Indifferent. What was worse, he had misinterpreted her words and believed she loved someone else—loved Poe—and he didn’t even care. It was absurd that he would believe she could ever love anyone but him. Wiping the tears from her cheeks with an agitated huff, she followed the sand away from that place, away from Ben.

She stopped.

Away from Ben.

Was that what she wanted? To be away from him, after what she suffered without him? She hadn’t given up on him at his darkest; she hadn’t given up on him when there was no hope left, and she couldn’t give up on him now. Ben said he was giving her a choice. If he was, then she would make it. Turning around, she followed her feet back up the path to him. At some point in the short time since she had left, he had collapsed to his knees. His head hung forward as he stared down at the dice in his hands. He reminded her of the man she had left on Crait those many months ago.
“Poe Dameron…” she said across the sand. His head lifted to question her silently, and he suddenly looked so drained and weary. Broken. “You would be okay if I fell in love with him? Your sworn enemy? You don’t care?”

Ben considered her question carefully. “He’s not my enemy, Rey, not anymore. And it’s not that I don’t care. I do care. I just…don’t blame you. I understand it. I want…I want you to be happy.” There was a rawness to the wound in his eyes. It was incongruous to a man who didn’t care, who didn’t love her with everything in him. Ben was no longer Force-sensitive, but his eyes betrayed the misery he battled to conceal. He looked away for a moment as if looking at her was too painful. “Is he good to you?”

“He is,” she answered. “Love has softened him. He’s changed.” Ben nodded, puffing out his cheeks and blinking rapidly as he refused to meet her stare. The man looked like he had suffered less being tortured. She stepped closer. “His former-stormtrooper boyfriend seems to love him just as much, so I’m happy for them both.”

Only then did Ben’s confused gaze find her again. Rey narrowed her eyes back at him. “You think so little of me that you believe I would fall in love with him? After everything he did to us?”

“You said you were with him on Jakku,” he murmured. “And you said something about him, Finn, Rose and your droid being your family. You are the most forgiving person I’ve ever met. I thought he had been the one to earn your heart. Whoever it was that did, he’s the luckiest man in the galaxy.” His voice broke on the last word, and she realized she had been mistaken.

Ben cared. Profoundly.

“You were wrong,” she said. As he knelt before her, he reminded her of the man on Crait again, his expression open and pained. He was at her mercy. His eyes pled for her judgment. She could be cruel, but they had suffered enough. “When you said I met someone ‘better,’ you were wrong. I didn’t meet anyone ‘better,’ because no one could ever compare to you. The rest of what I said was true, but I never fell in love with anyone else; I didn’t want to. My heart has only ever been yours.”

Ben must have been holding his breath. The long sigh he released was shuddering and broken. It almost sounded like a sob, which wasn’t at all what she expected. Shouldn’t he be happy, or, in the very least, relieved? His entire countenance was unsettlingly contradictory. His eyes looked bright and hopeful, but his face was twisted with emotion. He nodded again, but tears formed in his lashes. As he attempted to catch his breath to answer her, the silence stretched between them. She
waited anxiously for a response, and when it came, tears welled in her own eyes. “And mine… yours,” he said, his voice thick. “Everything you resent me for since Ilum, probably long before that, I did because I love you.”

“How could you even think that?” he asked with a shake of his head. “I will love you every second I have left in this life, and every second after that. After I… left, I cried myself to sleep for weeks, I didn’t know if I would ever see you again. There were times when I thought about you and it hurt so much I couldn’t breathe. Every day has been torture without you.” Rey took in his appearance again. The last rays of light from the remaining sun highlighted the truth—he looked lost, bereft, curling in upon himself to conceal his pain. He had looked so young and unburdened when he had first turned around to look at her, but perhaps she was wrong; perhaps he had been suffering every day as well. Perhaps it was a different kind of suffering he endured – perhaps it was more hopeful than the hell he suffered before. She walked to him, lowering herself to the ground in front of him.

“Ask me.”

He was staring at her, but he seemed even more lost than before. “What?”

“I had the chance to live on my own without you. That’s why you did this, isn’t it? If you still want me, then ask me, Ben,” she said, trying to control the wavering fear in her voice. “Ask me to choose you.”

For a moment, his stare shifted back and forth between her eyes, searching for something. He must have found what he was looking for, because all at once, his lips were quivering again, and his eyes were wet with emotion. There was something deep and powerful within them. She should have known not to doubt his love for her; the bond had laid bare that truth long ago. This was Ben Solo, who had come a long way, but he still had a thing or two to learn about happiness. Thank the Force he had her to teach him.

“Rey…” He tried to speak, but he was too overcome with emotion. Her words had profoundly affected him, he was a tumultuous wreck of inner struggle. Tears ran down his face; his breathing was uneven and heavy. The man looked like he just might drown under all his emotions, and she realized that, Force or no Force, he still felt everything with all his heart. She thought he was fighting the urge to sob, so she grabbed his hand in support.
If there was one struggle she understood, it was this. She understood what it was like to miss someone with her entire soul. She understood what it was like to finally have hope in something she had thought was gone forever. Rey understood him.

*Oh, Ben.*

It was heartbreaking to realize that it hadn’t occurred to him until that moment that she would still want him. Their reunion had evoked a mixture of emotions—anger and heartache, relief and joy, and, of course, hope. Perhaps that was why she wasn’t surprised when his sobs broke up with fits of laughter; his emotions were a jumbled mess that he couldn’t quite sort.

Ben sounded mildly insane for a moment, sobs giving way to laughter that devolved into sobs again, but he found his composure eventually. He dried his tears and just...stared at her. It was as if he were committing every single freckle to memory. Or, perhaps he already had, and he was just remembering them, the way one remembers the words to a treasured song they hadn’t heard in years. He wasn’t smiling, but there was something bright and hopeful about his expression. When he spoke, his words were soft. “I could never give you the life you deserve…”

“Ben…”

“Wait, I…just wait. I have all these thoughts in my head, but I always say the wrong thing. I’m trying, but I need your help.” He tightened his grip on her hand and brought it to his temple. Rey brushed against the surface of his mind, unfamiliar with the profound lack of mental barriers. She searched his eyes for permission, and he tipped his head in a slight nod.

*I could never give you the life you deserve, even if I could give you the whole galaxy, it would never be enough. I can’t give you the galaxy, and I know now you wouldn’t want it if I could. I have nothing to offer you: no power, no force, no bond, nothing. I am nothing to this galaxy now. All I have to give you is myself. Ben Solo. I am the son of legends and former Supreme Leader of the First Order, an exiled war criminal transporting in the Outer Rim for my uncle. It’s not much, it’s not Bespin, but if you want me, I’ll give you all of myself. If you stay with me, I promise you’ll never be alone. I don’t know what the future holds. I can’t promise I’ll be with you for the rest of your life, but I can promise you my love for every moment of mine.*

*You are the other half of my soul, you are the only one who understands the life I’ve lived, you stopped me from drowning in my own darkness, you helped me let go of my past. You saved me from myself, Rey; you didn’t give up even when I did. I love you, sweetheart. It’s the only thing I’ve been certain of in my entire life. I’m not proud of what I’ve done, I can’t change who I was or what I am, but I have been given a second chance. All I can ask is that you spend the rest of*
that second chance with me.

He reached forward, offering his bare hand tentatively.

“Please.”

He only said the one word aloud, but even if she had not heard the unfiltered thoughts in his mind, she had seen every last flicker of emotion in his eyes.

“Say it,” she whispered as she blinked away tears.

Understanding bloomed in his searching gaze, and there was a hopeful sigh on his lips. His hand unfurled further. “Join me, Rey?”

“Yes, Ben,” she answered with a smile. It felt as if a missing piece of her soul slid into place as she laid her hand in his. He immediately pulled her into him. His arm held her to himself as if his life depended on it, his face buried into her neck. “I choose you,” she whispered against his hair. “I’ll always choose you.”

Feelings of relief and completion passed over her as she found herself exactly where she wanted to be. All she had was hope for what the future would hold for them now that the Force had brought them together again. It wasn’t until she felt the shuddering of his shoulders that she realized he was quietly sobbing against her.

“Ben?”

“Are you sure?” he asked against her skin. “Because once I have you, I don’t think I could survive letting you go again. I’ll give you everything I have, but you’ll still be destined to a life –”

“…with you. A life with you,” she answered. “That’s what I want. I don’t care where we go, or where life takes us, as long as I’m with you. The rest is just details; being with you is what makes me happy. Because you’re worth it, and I love you.”

“This life won’t be easy. The people out there…they hate me, for good reason. Will you still stay,
even if I will never be free of the darkness? Never free of who I was? Do you know what they’ll say…about you…for being with me? I am a monster to them, Rey,” he whispered as he wiped the tears pooling in the corner of his eyes. She remembered her dream; the way they treated him. If that was the price they paid to be together, she would gladly pay it.

"You were a monster," she replied, forcing him to finally make eye contact with her. She realized during one of their first Force bond interactions how deeply those words affected him. When he had remembered that she had spat that venomous word at him in the forest on Starkiller—and when she had chosen to use those words like weapons against him again—for the first time she had seen misery in his eyes. Those words that held control over him in the past—words he had come to define himself by—pierced deeper than she had understood. Not that it would have mattered then; she had enjoyed seeing the pain her words caused him, but it broke her heart seeing it now. To the galaxy, just as she had been nothing, he had been a monster. "But not to me. That’s all that matters."

She smiled as he pulled her into an embrace, wrapping his strong arms around her firmly as if he intended never to release her again. She would be content if he didn’t. The feel of his strong, steady heartbeat against her and the calming puff of his warm breath against her shoulder were more comforting than the most filling meal. That proof of life was something most took for granted, but not Rey, not anymore. “Please, don’t leave me alone again.”

“You were never alone,” he murmured into her shoulder. “There was always a part of me with you, Rey. There always will be. Memory, distance, death—what we have is stronger than all of that. No matter how long we had to wait, the Force always brought me back to you. You’ll never be alone, I promise.”

“Neither will you,” she replied. “Because we’ll be together. I don’t care about what the rest of the galaxy says. I only want you.”

Ben didn’t respond, but his tightened grip and the shuddering in his shoulders were answer enough. He wanted her, too, but he was afraid. Rey slid her hand up his back to his neck, running her fingers through his soft curls. “I had a dream once…at least I think it was a dream. I had it after I tried to save you, before I woke up on Bespin. I dreamed I couldn’t save you, you died, and I lived my life for you. I saw every world I wanted to see, did everything I dreamed of doing. But every world I went to, I had to hear the horrible things they said about you. That wasn’t the worst part, though. Want to know the worst part?” He nodded against her. “You weren’t there to show them how wrong they were. I don’t care about the whispers. What good is a normal life if it’s a life without you in it? Family is all I’ve ever wanted. I’ve had to make my own so far, but it wouldn’t be complete without you. With holocalls and regular visits, I’ll still have the rest of my family. But this is the belonging I was searching for my entire life. This is why the Force connected us. This is how our story is supposed to end, Ben. Us. Together. Just me and you.”
He pulled back from her embrace to study her eyes. As he bit his lip, his expression grew playful. “Just you and I?”

“Force, you’re still pretentious, but you have no idea how happy it makes me to hear that,” she laughed. He smiled, but there was something else there, something she didn’t understand. Something he was hiding. Gee-Bee, who had been so patient, knocked into her side in irritation. She glanced down at the droid. “I’m sorry, I didn’t forget about you.”

“Ben, this is Gee-Bee,” she said with an anxious smile. “Gee-Bee, this is the man I was telling you about—Ben.”

Shifting back onto the heels of her feet, she cleaned the sand out of the droid’s sensor with her cape. “So I guess it’s you, me, and this girl.”

“And Blue.”

She smiled, looking around for the astromech. “Blue’s here?”

He nodded, chewing on his words with an expression she couldn’t quite decipher.

“Does he—”

“Remember?” he finished. “Not really, he remembers bits and pieces in his ‘dreams.’ He remembers people, but not the memories. The ‘Bad Men’ are just nightmares now. I think it’s better that way.”

There was a pang of sorrow in her chest that the droid wouldn’t remember her, the trials they suffered, or the bond she had shared with Ben. Just as she had to accept with Kylo, she reminded herself that what mattered was the droid was alive. In this case, they had the future to make more memories. “Okay, me, you, Gee-Bee, and Blue,” she smiled. “Or is it Gee-Bee, Blue, you and I?”

Ben returned her smile, but there was a seriousness in his eyes that terrified her. “Rey, there’s something I should show you.” Without an explanation, he pulled her up with him as he stood. Then tilting of his head, he walked toward the direction of the charred residence.
As she followed him, Rey noticed a small collection of grave markers to the right. The first group of markers were older. There were three markers for Edern Lars, Cliegg Lars, and Shmi Skywalker Lars that looked the oldest, the names barely visible. They also had burn marks on them, as if they had been inside the residence during the fire, and someone had set them—or re-set them—in the ground after.

Others were more recent, though they had still weathered with time. The markers for Owen Lars, Beru Lars, Jedi Master Ben Kenobi, Jedi Master Yoda, Senator Bail Organa, Queen Breha Organa, Senator Padmé Amidala Naberrie Skywalker, and Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker had all been written by the same hand, and something in her knew it had been Luke. He had returned to his former home; he had made certain they would all be remembered.

It was the newest markers that drew her attention. They showed no signs of weather or time. The ground around each marker was still dark where the soil had been disturbed. They were arranged in orderly little rows separated from the older group, the names written with a talented hand. As she read each one, the names became blurry through unshed tears. Jedi Knight Cade Calixte, Jedi Knight Clighal, Jedi Knight Dal Konur, Jedi Knight Tionne Solusar, Jedi Knight Kyp Durron, Jedi Knight Corran Horn, Jedi Knight Dorsk 81, Jedi Knight Rayf Ysanna. She found it touching that Jedi Knight Jacen Fel and Jedi Knight Jaina Fel and Jedi Knight Alema Rar and Jedi Knight Dev Sibwarra were placed next to each other for eternity.

The other markers she had a more difficult time reading through. Chewbacca read one marker, and she smiled because it stood taller than the rest. Captain Han Solo was next to that one. Underneath his name, written small, but neat were the words, "Kessel Run in under twelve parsecs." Next to his marker was General Leia Organa Solo. Of all the markers, the ground around that one was the most immaculate, as if great care had been taken in setting it. The last one, closest to the front and set in between the new and old groups was the marker for Jedi Master Luke Skywalker. On the ground before the marker was a compass. She knew where she had last seen it.

It was the history of the Skywalker line, either by blood or through love. It warmed her heart that Ben had finished what had been started there. He had found his own way to remember his family. Though it was difficult to read the names of all the people who had been lost before their time, she smiled because their memories lived on—the grave markers were only proof of that. She could have told their story, but without him, it would have been a story of tragedy.

But now, Ben was there to carry on their legacy. They had saved him from suffering their tragic fates, and the Skywalker name would live on through Ben—a name that meant hope. The story of the Skywalkers would end with that hope they all fought to save, not with the despair of what they had lost. If he left the mortal world before her, she would ensure that one day Ben’s name would be added to those markers. She wondered if her name would be placed alongside it. She doubted Ben would ever want children, but if they had them in the future, she hoped they would add her name next to his when it was her time. There was something beautiful about their love being immortalized forever with the family that had become more of a family to her than her own had ever been.
“Rey?” Ben said, breaking her from her thoughts. “Are you coming?”

Rey nodded with a smile, wiping the tears from her eyes.

Grasping his hand, she took one last look at the grave markers before she followed him. They walked through the charred dome down to an open courtyard. The walls were black with smoke, the far side of the courtyard had collapsed, but the rest was in good condition. She tried to imagine what it had been like before—what Luke had seen when he was growing up there.

“We were inside…well, underground…and I thought I heard a TIE fly over.”

“That was my fighter,” she answered. “Set it down in a ravine not far from here.” He turned, his eyes full of questions. “We repurposed them after the war.” She hoped it would draw a smile from him, but his attention was elsewhere. She could see the struggle, the conflict, in his eyes.

What’s wrong?

“I couldn’t tell from down here, but I thought you flew out toward the horizon,” he said, staring off to his right. “I told them to hide.”

Them?

“Ben…”

He turned, standing before a dark room. His focus fixed on that darkness. “You can come out now,” he called. Blue rolled hesitantly from the shadows, and Rey bit back a sob. He looked exactly the same as she remembered, blue sensor and all. The droid’s questions were enthusiastic, but shy. “Yes, Blue, you’re right,” Ben said. “You have met her before. This is Rey.”

“Nice to meet you, Blue,” she said. Blinking back emotion, she knelt to his level. “I have someone else I want you to meet. Blue, this is Gee-Bee.” The droids introduced themselves. Blue dramatically swiveled his domed head from the new droid back to Ben, asking why she was there and how long she was going to stay. He was clearly not enthralled with the idea of having another droid around.
“Give her a chance, Blue,” Ben said. “Go show her your hiding spots on the *Falcon.*”

The *Falcon.* Memories replayed in her mind—when she and Finn first stole the freighter, when Han reclaimed it, when she and Chewbacca took their adventure to Ahch-To, when she escaped with the Resistance from Crait, when she journeyed to Ilum with her friends, and when she returned after the war and grieved the man she loved. It held so many memories, good and bad. She *missed* that piece of junk. “I didn’t see it flying in.”

“It’s hidden in a canyon north of here,” Ben answered distantly as he nudged Blue to follow Gee-Bee. Rey searched Ben’s face for a clue to his struggle, but he refused to meet her stare. They both stood, dusting off their clothes. Rey remained focused on him as they listened to the droids’ bickering echoes as they rolled toward the exit of the crumbling structure. She hoped once the droids were out of earshot, he would be more forthcoming. But they stood in silence long after the droids were gone. Their solitude did nothing to ease the tension forming in his shoulders. Ben was afraid, but Rey was patient. She knew him better than anyone. Whatever it was, he would tell her, and they would work through it. Together.

What she *hadn’t* expected was the soft cry she heard from the dark room to her right. Rey turned to the room, half-convinced it was an illusion before she heard the cry again. She turned back to Ben. His expression was uneasy, and she knew that whatever he was hiding, it was in that room. “Before…you said you told ‘them’ to hide,” she reminded him.

He nodded, exhaling slowly. That indecipherable look passed over his eyes again. “Just…before you freak out, let me explain.” Without waiting for a response, he turned back toward the room. He rubbed his hands together and called out, “Come on out, kid. It’s safe.”

*Kid?*

Other than the heavy pounding of her heart, it was quiet as Rey scanned the darkness. After a moment, Ben disappeared into the room. She heard a rustling of fabric, and Ben stepped back out of the shadows. In his arms he carried a small boy, asleep on his shoulder. Rey gasped… dark, wavy hair…full lips pressed in a soft pout…an arrangement of moles and freckles on his face that she knew better than any star system in the galaxy. She had seen this boy before, in her vision, in his memories, in a *dream.* “Ben…” she tried to swallow, but her throat was dry.

“You have a son.”
Chapter End Notes

Jealousy

Misunderstanding leads to jealousy
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
“You have a son.”

It was a statement, not a question.

*You have a son.*

It was absurd, he knew, but he hadn’t considered the kid his *son* before. It wasn’t as if they called each other "Dad" and "Son." The kid called him "Ben," and, mostly, Ben just called him "kid." It was terrifying to imagine that the heap of hair, sweat, dirt, and constant "whys" actually relied fully on Ben to become someone who didn’t commit galactic genocide, let alone become a fully functioning adult.

There was never a plan or some sort of "parent" training; he just learned as he went along. The first night he was alone with the kid on the *Falcon,* he forgot to *feed* him. The kid never complained once, not a word, Ben only figured it out when he heard his stomach grumble. Ben couldn’t eat for the next three days in guilt for what he’d done. Parents were…different. His parents may have struggled with helping him through his darkness, but at least they remembered to *feed* him. They knew how to take care of children, they knew what was best for him, they had a clue what they were doing. Ben wasn’t a father; he couldn’t have a "son." The problem was…nothing could take back those four words.

*You have a son.*

Ben tried not to think about the implications, but each step, each breath, brought him closer to the moment he had to answer her. It would change everything. In his cowardice, he had tried his best to stall. He was able to delay the conversation for a few minutes by insisting they wait until he was certain the kid would stay asleep. It was obvious the boy was not going to wake any time soon. His slight weight was solid against him, his head repeatedly slipped from Ben’s shoulder while they walked, and the kid didn’t so much as twitch. Once he was asleep, Ben knew the kid wouldn’t wake if a Wookiee roared next to his head. It was quite remarkable, really.

A part of Ben felt relieved. He feared the whispers finding the kid more than he feared them returning in his own head. Ben was acutely aware of every little whimper from the boy, fearing the nightmares that never materialized. Ben felt a profound desire to protect the boy from everything he had experienced. The whispers were his greatest fear – one he didn’t think would ever fade.
There was something relieving about the thought of having Rey by his side to worry endlessly about the boy…if she chose to stay. To discover the answer to that, he would have to talk to her, which he was actively attempting to avoid.

It was made easier by the fact that there was a mission that took priority. The galaxy was at risk as long as Sidious was somewhere an enemy could discover him. It was unlikely the monster could heal himself in a clone body without *Force Destiny*, but Ben refused to rest until Sidious was gone for good.

They were lost in that distraction for a little while. He explained his plan as they trudged back to the *Millennium Falcon*. They decided to fly to the location in the cover of darkness and end the threat that very night. She listened intently as he described Sidious’s final resting place, but she just kept *looking* at him with those eyes, begging him to tell her, without uttering a single word.

The remainder of their walk back to the *Falcon* had been quiet until that very moment, but he had still *felt* the tension in her. He may not have a sensitivity to the Force, but he knew her emotions were likely oppressive in the energy around them. Each step was a further delay, and he thought that he could make it back to the *Falcon* without answering her. Clearly, her patience had worn thin, however, because she had spoken those four life-altering words again. He knew there could be no more delaying the inevitable’ she deserved answers. The only question was – was this it? Was this the moment she left him? He steeled himself for heartache.

"I have a son."

She had seen his memories. He shouldn’t have been surprised she would recognize a child who looked just like him. Ben’s stomach twisted with nerves as he forced himself to face inevitability. Would she hate him for keeping it from her? Would she hate him for making the choice he did? Once he confirmed it, would she go back to Bespin without another word? It was unbelievable enough that she had chosen *him* and his droid, but this was a *child*. Ben wanted just another moment with her. He had just gotten her back; he didn’t want her to leave again, but he knew what he was asking her to accept was significant.

"Rey, I understand if you don’t want to be a part of this,” he said softly. “But I…if you want a life with me, it includes him.”

Rey was breathing far more raggedly than was necessary for someone as athletic as her to cross a desert. He didn’t take that as a good sign. “Let’s back up to the part where you had a son, Ben. A son you never told me about.” She didn’t *sound* angry, per se, not as angry as she had been earlier when he had apologized. But he also didn’t have the bond to assist him in discerning what she *was* feeling. “How old is he? You couldn’t have had him before you joined Sidious. Where’s his mother? *Who’s* his mother? Where was he until now? Why didn’t you tell me?”
Her questions were rapid-fire to a point they sounded rehearsed. Evidently, she had not been distracted by anything else on their walk. “I don’t know how old he is, he has no mother, and I only found out about him six months ago,” he answered.

“How do you not know how old your own…? Ben, those are *not* answers,” she said, throwing her hands up in exasperation. “And he has a mother. I don’t think I have to explain to you how children are made.”

Ben felt his own irritation grow at her insinuation. “I told you: before you, I never even kissed anyone,” he hissed, voice low in effort not to wake the boy.

“Ben,” she drawled in an attempt to temper her tone. She certainly sounded frustrated, but still not as angry as he expected. “I know you said Sidious wanted to make sure the Skywalker line didn’t continue, so maybe you hid him away. If this is some misguided attempt to protect me from knowing that I killed his mother and took her away from that boy….”

Other than the faint light cast by the three moons, it was dark. He already had a difficult time reading the expression on her face while balancing a child on his shoulder, but it almost sounded like she was insinuating…well, insinuating things he would have never done. “Wait, you think I… we…you think he’s Jaina’s?”

“Is he?”

In his disbelief that she could possibly believe that, he found himself repeating Rey’s words back to her. “You think so low of me you could believe I would fall in love with her? After what she did to us?”

“Ben, you were in a dark place under Sidious,” she sighed. “I know he did some utterly depraved things. I trust you, but with Jaina’s obvious obsession over you and the ‘false memories’ she implanted, it’s not difficult to believe maybe she did something to you. Or maybe Sidious made you do something you didn’t want to do. What I do know is she was the only girl around for years, I’m looking at your child, and it doesn’t take love to do…*that*.”

“It does for me.”

“Look,” Rey turned, blocking his path. Ben expected her to stare him down, hands on hips, as she
had done before. Instead, she just stood there, looking smaller than he had ever seen her, wringing her hands as she stared down at her feet. “Maybe I understand why you kept it from me before; we weren’t exactly on the same side, and I…betrayed your trust. But you don’t have to lie to me now. I love you, Ben. A child doesn’t change that.”

“It does change things, though.” He wasn’t certain if it was a question or a statement. His words were searching, fishing for a clue to her feelings about the boy.

Her eyes found his again and he only found resolve in them. “You’re right, and I’m not walking any further until you explain why I never knew you had a son.” Ben didn’t want to answer the endless questions she would have about the boy and where he came from. He only wanted to know whether she would leave.

“He wasn’t my son before,” he said, realizing belatedly how ridiculous it sounded. “It’s not what you”

“How stupid do you think I —”

Ben sighed in frustration. “Rey, he’s my clone.” As silence descended between them with those four words, he realized there would be no swift respite to his suffering.

He remembered when Dameron had led him to his office on Bespin. The admiral had told him it was easier to “just show him.” There had been many shocking revelations Ben had imagined when that door hissed open, but he never expected to see himself. Or a smaller version of himself, at least. It had seemed like a strange Force illusion. Ben was certain Rey was experiencing the same myriad of emotions that he’d felt when he had stared down at himself as a boy.

As Ben’s whole galaxy changed, Dameron had explained that he had rescued the kid off Kamino. Maz was supposed to take him far away from the war and find him a family who would love him. But Maz knew Ben did not have a promising chance to survive the war, so she believed Lando — his last living relative — would want the boy. After Ben turned, survived, and regained his memories, Lando decided he should have a choice in raising his genetic copy. When Dameron introduced them, the kid had taken one look at him and said, I’m you… and you’re me. Are we family?”

That was it for him.
Ben was responsible for his creation; he wouldn’t abandon him. His only hope was that he wouldn’t lose Rey in the process. Her voice was soft when she finally spoke. “You created more clones?”

He shook his head.

In the moonlight, he could see the tears in her eyes. “But Poe killed the others.”

“Not him,” he explained. “Dameron knocked into his pod on Kamino and accidentally detached the life support system that he had infected with the virus. He woke up, and Dameron couldn’t go through with killing him. He wasn’t like the other clones. They were programmed for obedience. No free will, no emotions, no drive beyond serving the First Order. But somehow…not him.”

“He was scared, and he knew what Dameron planned to do. His only wish was to hear a story about what was beyond the cloning facility. Dameron saw the humanity in him and couldn’t leave him to die on Kamino, so he saved him. After I met him, I couldn’t leave the kid behind. I just had to promise to let Lando have his daily holocalls with him.”

Something softened in him when she smiled. “That’s who Lando gets up so early to speak to every day.”

“Yes, I have my uncle to thank for the kid being a cheat at cards. That’s what I get for leaving the old man to holosit with Blue when I have on-world work to do. It’s not the kid’s fault he picks up everything so quickly,” Ben huffed. He may have feigned annoyance with the older man and his antics, but he was grateful that he had stepped up as a grandfather figure for the boy in place of the man who should have been there. It was his fault the kid didn’t have Han, Leia, Luke, Dev, Jacen, and Chewie, and his fault they never got to meet the kid as well. He knew how much that would have meant to his mother, but she would never have the chance to see her grandson. Though, sometimes, when the boy thought he was alone, it looked as if he was…smiling at people who weren’t there. It terrified Ben in the beginning, but the boy was never afraid of what he saw. Ben wondered if his family did have a chance to meet him. He hoped so; the boy was the best thing to ever happen to the galaxy.

“This kid, he’s not a clone, not really,” he continued. “He’s…special. He’s brave. Anything new makes him anxious, but his favorite thing to do is explore new places. He likes building things and taking them apart; he likes fixing things, like you do. He loves flying, especially when we break atmo. He likes creatures, but not most sentients, especially other kids. He’s smart; he reads a lot and taught himself tons of languages already. He has a wisdom about life that he shouldn’t have yet. He’s kind and honest and observant and logical. And he really likes me, for some reason. He loves all food and getting dirty, and he sleeps like a Wookiee. He is terrible at finishing anything he starts, he’s personally offended by my inability to fit into most hiding places, and he doesn’t put
a single thing away. Ever. And I’ve smelt a lot of terrible things in this galaxy, but this kid’s feet are by far the worse. But I won’t move him when he crawls into my bed and his feet end up in my face, because, well...because it’s him.”

Rey was smiling by the time he was finished. “You love him,” she said; it wasn’t a question. He nodded slowly. The kid was much needier than a droid and disorganized in a way that was almost purposeful, and he smelled like a trash compactor constantly, but he made Ben want to be someone worth the way that kid looked at him. “Ben, when I asked you to explain the first time…” She reached forward and tapped her finger on his nose. “You should have led with all that.”

“So will he be…a normal child?”

_Doubtful, he thought, he’s my clone, after all._

Ben understood what she was truly asking, however. “We were all worried about what would happen to him once he was no longer hooked up to the life-support machines on Kamino. That was how they received their nutrition and the activators that target the growth accelerators to activate the sequences of their DNA that is not human. Technically, he was only a few weeks old at the most, and we worried he would either stop growing or continue to grow at an accelerated rate. I have no idea what species were used, or how it will affect him. As far as we can tell, he just grows like a normal human kid now, and time will tell if he presents with any non-human traits.”

“Is he Force-sensitive?”

Ben sighed. He wanted more than anything else for the boy to never have to struggle with the light and darkness within him. If Ben had not been born Force-sensitive, he was convinced his past would have been vastly different. Ben wanted a normal childhood for the kid, and if that was a childhood without the Force, then so be it. Ben was surviving without the Force; the boy could too. He wouldn’t even know what he was missing. “Maz said she saw something interesting in his eyes, but not so far. None of the other clones were.”

A holoprojector beeped in Rey’s satchel, interrupting the inevitable deliverance of his fate. She fished it out, gestured for him to be quiet, and activated it. The admiral’s face appeared in a blue projection. Ben watched her curiously, wondering why she wanted Dameron to believe he wasn’t
there. Without even exchanging pleasantries, Dameron dove right into business. “I was calling for an update.”

Rey bit back a smile. “I found the Lars homestead; I just had to do a mind trick on a bartender in Mos Eisley.” Ben almost laughed at that because he had also received directions to the Lars homestead by irritating the hell out of a bartender in Mos Eisley. What were the odds?

“Did you find…Sidious?”

The admiral’s words were clearly fishing, but Rey wouldn’t bite. “Yes!” she said enthusiastically, “The mission is almost done.”

“Any…other news?”

Rey turned toward Ben, laughter in her eyes. “Nothing else to report.” It was only then that Ben realized she was playing games with him. Evidently, Dameron hadn’t told her that they had been in regular contact about Sidious since he left. The admiral knew exactly where he was the entire time, both through the communication and the tracking implant in his neck. If Dameron convinced her to come to Tatooine, she must know by now that he knew who she would find there.

This was payback.

“There was no one else there?” Dameron sounded slightly more panicked, and Ben couldn’t help but snort. There was a shuffling sound as the admiral lifted his datapad and focused intently on the screen. Ben wouldn’t have been surprised if the man had his tracking data routed to the device. “It doesn’t make sense,” he mumbled to himself.

Rey smiled innocently, batting her eyelashes. “Who did you think would be here, Poe?”

Dameron was no fool. He narrowed his eyes at her. “You’re lying. You’re with him right now, aren’t you?”

“You know all about lying, Poe Dameron,” she replied with a smirk.
The admiral leaned back, sighing. “Do you have an idea how long it took to set this all up?”

*Six months.*

Rey gasped in mock offense. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“It couldn’t have been sooner, and it had to be Tatooine,” Dameron answered. “The tracking beacons on Ben, the *Falcon*, and the Carbonite made him the safest and most unlikely person to hide that creature. The council wouldn’t even think about allowing me to send anyone to Tatooine until the machine was destroyed, and Sidious—and by extension, Ben—couldn’t be within a star system of that machine. It had to be now. But wasn’t it a good surprise? Because he *is* with you, right?”

Rey tilted the holoprojector so Ben was centered in the screen. “Hey, Solo. How’s the kid?” Poe asked him, and Ben shrugged. The kid was alive; that had to count for something. Raising a child was a lot harder than Ben had thought. Lando helped, but he wished he had his parents to bring up on holocall when the kid refused to take a shower or wandered off without him. Droids were much easier. He didn’t need to remember to feed droids or know where the nearest public refresher was.

When he didn’t answer verbally, Rey brought the projector back to face herself. “How’s the holiday?” she asked the admiral. “Where’s Neek’o?”

“He’s sleeping in the chair. I’m in a medbay; I broke a couple of ribs swimming.”

“Sure, you did.” He didn’t respond, but Rey giggled, so he must have made a crude gesture. “Well, in any case, you probably deserve it…for lying to me for six months.”

“I didn’t lie, Rey,” Dameron said in exasperation. “I just didn’t tell you the truth.”

Rey brought the holo centimeters from her face. She spoke to Dameron through bared teeth, and Ben was thankful that *he* wasn’t on the receiving end of it. “I can’t believe no one even told me about the kid!”

The admiral shrugged. “No one thought Solo would keep him alive this long.”
“Take a walk out an airlock, Dameron,” Ben said, mostly in jest, and the other man laughed.

“You first!”

“Enough, you two,” Rey said, a smile in her voice. “Do Finn and Rose know?”

“They know I sent you to find Solo, but they don’t know about the kid.” Dameron winced as he shifted, and, for the first time, Ben could hear the steady beeps from the medbay. “Hold on, I’ll get Finn on the line, you can tell him yourself.”

Ben tuned most of the next part out, not because he disliked the people, but too many people in a conversation was draining. It was much easier to contemplate the logistics of who would pilot the Falcon, or where they would sleep, than keep track of all those voices. Rey laughed and greeted her friends, exchanging pleasantries, and Ben remembered a time when it irritated him to no end to see her happy with her friends. Now, though, as he walked next to the woman he loved and held the kid that had changed his whole world, he was….

“Happy. You look happy,” Rose commented to her friend, and Ben glanced up to look at Rey. She was beaming. Maybe…maybe this could be enough for her. They hadn’t finished their conversation. Rey hadn’t told him how she felt, but she seemed accepting about the development—even excited. He found it encouraging that she had been more upset with him that he didn’t tell her about the kid than the kid himself. Nearing the Millennium Falcon at the mouth of a cave, Ben found the boarding ramp down with the two droids waiting at the bottom, looking guilty as ever.

“I am. I’ve never been happier,” Rey replied, and Ben couldn’t help but smile. “And I have even more news. I have someone else I want you to meet.”

She turned the holoprojector to Ben again, and he gave a slight wave. He never was comfortable when everyone turned their attention to him. It was easier this time, as they focused on the boy. “Is that…Rey, tell me you didn’t kidnap a child!” Rose gasped.

Rey, thankfully, answered for him. “I didn’t kidnap him. Poe did. He’s a clone of Ben, so I guess that makes you Auntie and Uncle.” Ben coughed to mask the absurd choking sound he made at her suggestion that she wanted to be a part of the life he had been building. Hope ignited anew in his chest despite his best attempts to temper it. It was challenging when his mind wouldn’t abandon one encouraging thought.
If they are Aunt and Uncle, then that would make her...

“Uncle Finn. I like that,” he heard her best friend tell her. He sounded…happy for her. It was surreal. “Look at you, Rey, you’ve got yourself a family.” Ben didn’t miss the tear that rolled down her cheek as she smiled. *Family.* It was all she had ever wanted and all he had ever run from. He couldn’t imagine running now. They were his entire galaxy, including the guilty-looking droid at his feet, who was chirping too many compliments at him for it to be anything other than the astromech’s attempt at charming his way out of trouble.

Ben balanced the kid on his shoulder as he knelt next to his droid. “What did you do?”

The droid responded hesitantly.

“I don’t care whose fault it is. What did you do?”

The answering beeps sounded guilty, but Ben knew he was only guilty for getting caught. He flicked the droid on his dome head with a chuckle and stood. “Impressive.”

Ben followed Rey up the ramp, listening to her laugh joyfully with her friends. If she would stay, he could make this work. She could stay connected to her friends through holocalls and maybe… maybe he shouldn’t get ahead of himself. She had chosen him, but that was before the kid. And she admitted that it *did* change things.

As they made their way through the ship, he compulsively stopped by the compartment that held the Carbonite slab containing Sidious. It was almost over. They had made it to Tatooine. He had flown over the spot he had chosen for the final resting place of his former master. No one had come for Sidious; perhaps no one cared anymore. It seemed impossible, but perhaps it truly was almost over.

His stomach had sunk when he had heard the familiar scream of the TIE fly over. He had thought it was the last sound he would ever hear. When the home didn’t explode into flames—for the second time—he had gone out to draw enemies away from the droid and boy. When he had heard the lightsaber, he had thought he was turning to look into the eyes of his executioner. Fate had been kinder. Now Rey was here with him to end it, once and for all.

Ben set the boy down on a bunk and pulled a blanket over him. Rose had to repeat a question three times before Rey answered, and when he turned to determine why, he found her focus was on him
and the kid. There was something warm and soft in her eyes as she watched him. Ben thought she would have been terrified; he had been terrified. She was always much better at trusting in the Force to guide her than he had ever been. That was how their paths had crossed again, after all. Everything felt…right. He followed Rey to the cockpit and chuckled when she sat down in the Pilot’s chair.

_Good thing I love you._

He caught the tail-end of her conversation as he prepared the _Falcon_ for departure. “I love you guys, I’ll call you when he wakes up, so you can meet him.”

“What’s his name?” Rose asked.

“Well, it was DV-2187,” Poe cut in. “When I heard that, Finn, I knew I had to take him.”

“Only the best rebels have that ID number,” Finn agreed. “Good luck with that.”

Ben snorted before turning to Rey. She was staring at him with wide eyes. “I’ll let him tell you when he holocalls later,” she equivocated, before saying her goodbyes to her friends and promising to get in touch the moment the boy awoke.

_I didn’t tell her his name_, Ben realized. He had taken to calling the little ball of dirt “kid” so often when speaking about him to others that he hadn’t realized until then that he hadn’t told her.

“His name is Dev,” he said. “Dev Solo.”

“Dev.” He knew he had made the right choice the second she gave life to the name. “I love it.”

“I thought about naming him Anakin,” he murmured. “I thought it would be like starting over, giving the Skywalkers another chance at a happy story. But I know more than anyone the weight of bearing the name of a legend, especially a legend like my grandfather. I didn’t want him to struggle with that, too. So, I gave him the name of the man who was like my brother, and, for a long time, my only family. He helped give us our second chance, so I thought the name would mean something to that kid, too.”
Rey smiled. “It’s perfect for him. He’s perfect.”

Ben couldn’t do it anymore; he couldn’t wonder if these were his last moments with her. “Does that mean you’ll stay?” he asked, trying not to sound hopeful.

“All right?” she said, brows furrowed, as if she hadn’t considered the alternative, as if the decision was the easiest she had ever made. “Right?” When all he could do was nod, she returned to the controls, and he took his seat next to her, feeling lighter than he had felt in his entire life. There was too much he needed to tell her, but he couldn’t surmount the waves of thoughts and emotions crashing through his mind to form the words. He would. Eventually, he would overcome the tear-inducing happiness that she would stay, he would overcome the overwhelming disbelief that – for once in his life – he was loved and wanted, and nothing stood in the way of his happiness. He would sort his thoughts and he would tell her what she meant to him. Eventually. They had all the time in the galaxy.

As they began the launch procedure, Ben heard a crash in the rear of the ship. Rey was interpreting the typical Aurebesh readouts on the navicomputer, so he stood up to find the two troublemaking droids. “I’ll go threaten to lock them in a smuggling compartment,” he grumbled.

As he walked toward the sound, Rey shouted after him. “Ben? What did you do to the navicomputer?”

“Heaven tried hitting it?” he shouted back.

“You can’t—or…” He heard some strangled noises of frustration before she finally answered him. “You can’t fix this by hitting it. Why did you set the language to Futhark?”

He sighed as he bit back a grin. “Blue!”
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
There were three moons high in the sky of Tatooine as Rey set the Millennium Falcon down on the flattest section in the Northern Dune Sea, close enough—but not too close—to the massive pit in the sand that was their ultimate destination. Rey went to open the boarding ramp as Ben pulled the Carbonite tomb imprisoning Sidious from a hidden compartment, but she had become distracted when she passed by the boy.

*Dev.*

She understood how Ben had derived part of the name from DV-2187, but she grateful to learn that there was more behind it. The boy’s namesake meant the galaxy to her as well. She hoped wherever he was, he was proud of what they had done with their second chance. She hoped that boy would understand just what his namesake had given their little family.

Rey couldn’t wait to know the little boy who had already stolen her heart. He may have had identical features to Ben, but she could feel their difference in the force. Though there was still a shadow of darkness, Dev’s energy was bright like a star, brighter even than his father. It was still strange to say. Ben was a *father*. A deeply loving one. That didn’t surprise her; Ben had always been a man who loved with everything in him. She knew his parents would be proud. Rey would be forever grateful to them that they gave him a second chance at life. Not just for her, but for the unconditional love he got to experience through this little boy.

Ben would have the chance to give this boy the childhood he never had. Rey couldn’t help but think that this was the Force’s way of giving her a second chance, too. She had begged for the opportunity to protect him from the whispers and help him from the darkness. The force hadn’t allowed her to help Ben, but she *could* help Dev. She could ensure that what happened to Ben—and her—never happened to this boy; she could give Dev everything they hadn’t had.

It was why there was nothing to consider when Ben told her about Dev. Had Poe shown *her* the boy instead of Ben, she would have taken him in immediately. Every child deserved a family, and a family was all she had ever wanted. She had more than enough love saved up to give this boy the chance she never had. She didn’t know the ins and outs of raising children, but from living through Ben’s memories and living her own lonely journey, she knew what they needed.

If Ben had died that day, or his memories had never returned, she wondered if the others would have kept the existence of the boy from her. She wanted to believe they wouldn’t have. This boy
could have been the only thing left of Ben that she had, and he would have meant the world to her. Having Dev with her would have helped her in her struggle the last six months; she couldn’t imagine what he would have meant to her if Ben had truly died.

Part of her was grateful, however, that she didn’t meet him until she found Ben again. It wouldn’t have been fair to burden a child with her pain. And if Ben had died, the shadows of that legacy seemed like a mighty weight for the boy to carry. Not only would he have been burdened with the expectation and desires she projected upon him, but he would have had opposite—but equally daunting—burdens to overcome in the eyes of the galaxy. Without Ben, there would have been entire civilizations watching to see what became of the clone of the former Supreme Leader. She knew enough about legacies from Ben and his family to know she wouldn’t want that for a child. By saving Ben, the Force had given this child a chance as well. He was free to be anyone he wanted.

Dev’s eyelashes fluttered in his sleep, and she couldn’t help but smile. She had never spoken to the boy, didn’t know the little traits and habits that she would one day know better than anyone, but she loved him. She had loved him the moment she first laid eyes upon him. She wondered how she could love someone so completely at first sight. It was something she had never experienced before, not even with Ben. It should have terrified her. The boy was all but a stranger, but she would do anything for this boy; she would die to protect him. She had never had a chance to miss him, but she felt complete the second she watched Ben carry him out of that room. She had never loved anyone like she loved a boy she had only met once in a dream.

“Rey,” Ben whispered behind her, shattering her thoughts like glass. The deep, dulcet tone when he murmured her name was her favorite. From the very first time he had said it, her name on his lips was so delicate. It was soft and silky and warm. It was nearly a prayer in its reverence. Even amid phrases like “you’re not alone” and “I love you”—words that had changed everything for her—she would never take for granted his whisper of her name again.

When he had fought for the opposite side, it was often the only reminder that Ben was still under that mask. When he had lain lifeless on the floor, she had screamed with aching desperation for him to whisper her name again. When he stared at her like a stranger, lost to his own mind, it was the one word she had wished for. She had missed it more than any other word over the past six months. It was something that would always remind her of what she had lost—and the extraordinary gift she was given back.

Rey turned to him, her heart full. His expression was unusually soft for a man preparing to send the creature who had caused him and his family momentous suffering to the closest living approximation of Hell. “Ready?”

Ready as I’ll ever be.
Rey joined him next to the hovering slab, her gaze falling to the monster entombed within. His head was tilted back, his face frozen in a cruel laugh. The features were similar to Ben, of course, but, even at his darkest, he had never looked so evil. A chill shivered through her as she was reminded of the touch of that monster’s energy. She didn’t think Ben was faring much better. His arms were tense, and his eyes were everywhere except on the creature before him. Blue wished them luck, and Ben could barely manage a response. He exhaled slowly as he pushed the slice of flash-frozen carbon down the boarding ramp. When he reached the bottom, he turned back to Blue.

“Close the ramp behind us,” he told the droid. “If anyone approaches, you know what to do. If the kid wakes up, I’ve got my comlink.”

By the light of the moons, they made their way across the sand. Ben was quiet, lost to his own thoughts. Rey let him have space. Though she didn’t like the idea of him suffering from his internal struggle, she was there next to him if he needed her. She knew it was worlds better than if he had to do this alone. Curious as to whether it would affect him without a connection to the Force, she gently grasped his hand, sending soothing light into him. If it did comfort him, she wondered if he would know what she did. She made a note to ask him later. Though he no longer felt the Force, she was grateful that he understood it.

The only sound was the soft brush of their boots through the sand. The blue-hued moonlight illuminated the crests of the endless rolling dunes before them. It cast a dreamlike illusion of calm, a beguiling benignity, but Rey knew it was far more…insidious than it appeared. There was something fearsome lurking in the stillness of the night, something lurking in the darkness where the moonlight couldn’t reach. If she hadn’t already known, she would have been alerted by the silence around them—nature’s warning that danger was near. If only the creatures of the desert understood that the real predator wasn’t in that pit, but in the Carbonite slab they pushed toward its eternal sepulcher.

Ben slowed as they neared their destination, grasping her arm to prevent her from following her feet down the last dune. At first glance, there were no landmarks or ominous indicators that the darkness between these two dunes was any different than the previous ones. But as she stared down into the darkness, she realized the dark was too dark. It wasn’t sand, it was a yawning abyss, and in its center was death itself. A less aware desert traveler could have easily fallen into its entrapment.

“The Pit of Carkoon,” he said, leaning forward to stare into its depths. She couldn’t see it, but somewhere at the center was a gigantic beak surrounded by far-reaching tentacles. It was the only evidence of the massive beast that lurked under the sand. It was waiting. And it was hungry.

“It’s a shame it’s so dark,” she whispered as if the beast could hear. “I’ve never seen a Sarlacc before.”
“Trust me, it’s down there,” he replied. “We can fly over it before we leave this place…if you even want to leave this place. We haven’t talked about where we go from here.”

“We’ll leave my fighter in Mos Eisley,” she murmured, finding the soft glow of his eyes in the moonlight. “If Poe wants to fly across the galaxy to retrieve it, he can. He deserves it for keeping secrets. After that, we’ve got the rest of eternity to figure it out.” Ben’s answering smile was careful, but it reached his eyes, curling them into crescents. “As long as we’re together, the where isn’t important. Wherever you and Dev go, Ben Solo, I go.”

“Good. I have a few places in mind,” he said. There was a gratefulness in his eyes, but not the disbelief she had seen before when she professed her desire to be with him. It was the first time Ben hadn’t questioned if she was certain. He finally trusted in her love for him. Ben didn’t say anything further before he turned back to the pit, but even in the seriousness of that moment, she felt the warmth in the softness of his energy. It was everything she’d ever hoped for him; Ben was happy. He released another long exhale as he stared down at the monster in the darkness. “Come on, let’s finish what my grandfather started.”

Together, they directed the frozen slab to the edge of the pit. With a press of a button, the repulsors inside the casing were disengaged, and the Carbonite dropped to the sand. It was heavier than Rey expected, but, with the aid of the sand, they pushed Sidious into the darkness below. There were screeches and hissing from the pit, and the sand around them rumbled. Rey grabbed onto Ben in support. The last place either of them wanted to wind up was next to Sidious in one of the Sarlacc’s stomachs.

“Enjoy Hell!” Ben shouted into the pit. The beast screeched back, and a large tentacle came into view as it slapped the sand in its search for them. They bolted in the opposite direction, back to the ship. At first, they were only fleeing the creature, but then they just kept going. The glide of Rey’s feet was natural after years spent in the deserts of Jakku, and Ben kept pace only by the advantage of his long stride. But there was something different about his movements now; something lighter and freer, as if every last burden that shackled him to a hopeless, predetermined destiny had disappeared. Perhaps the absence of the voices in his head were the cause. Whatever the reason, Ben looked as if he had finally escaped from the shadow of both legends and demons. For the first time in his life, Ben Solo was free to be himself. Relief and excitement bubbled up inside her as they raced over the sand. Sidious would no longer be a threat to her, Ben, the Skywalkers, or the galaxy.

They did it.

The light of the moon guided them away from the monsters in the darkness. Running over the sand, she felt weightless, as if she could spread her arms and fly far away from that place. She
didn’t know who began laughing first, but before long, they were both gasping as laughter stole their exhaustion. When they reached the safety of the Millennium Falcon, they collapsed into the sand in exhaustion.

As Ben sat in the sand, arms stretched behind him to support his weight, he smiled. Tilting his face to the stars, he closed his eyes as the breeze tousled his hair. “It’s over,” he whispered. “Sidious… Snoke… whoever he was, he’ll never escape. The Sarlacc will digest him over thousands of years. It will be a millennium or two before its stomach acids break down the Carbonite. Then the real pain begins. He’ll be attached to its stomach, kept alive by its nutrients alone, and digested alive over the next thousand years after that. I couldn’t think of a more excruciating way to die.”

“You’re safe,” she said, turning to him and interlacing her fingers with his. “You’re finally free.”

She barely registered the quick jerk of his hand before she was in his arms. He held her against him as if she was life itself and buried his face in her neck. With a sigh, she leaned against him. The tension of the war between them, his death, his memory loss, and the monster that tormented them faded away. He was hers for as long as fate smiled kindly upon them. She had never been happier, and the tears swelled from the overwhelming relief.

*It’s over. It’s finally over,* she repeated to herself until she began to believe it.

His strong, solid arms tightened around her back, pulling her closer. Then he just… held her. The warmth that surrounded her, his steady heartbeat against her, only served to release the glistening relief down her cheeks. *He’s here. He’s alive. He remembers. He’s free. Everything will be okay.* It was almost too good to be true. After everything that had driven them apart, it was difficult to believe she could stop fighting for him. This was forever. She smiled against him as the tears flowed freely.

For a man without the Force, he certainly had amazing senses. He tensed in immediate concern. Her fingers curled into his grey shirt as she sniffled. Without a word, he gently lifted her chin. She slowly raised her eyes, terrified to break that perfect moment, as if he would disappear in front of her. To where, she wasn’t certain. Maybe back across the galaxy, or maybe into the Force to reveal he had never been there at all. As she stared into his searching eyes, she waited, but he stayed. Rey took a moment to truly look at him then. A tender smile graced his lips as he brushed her hair out of her face. He looked younger. He wore different clothes, his energy in the Force was more peaceful, but his eyes revealed the same intensity of emotions, the same venerable soul she had fallen in love with. She reached out hesitantly to touch the single tear that cut down his cheek, but he wrapped her in his arms, pulling her back into his embrace. She clasped her arms fiercely around his neck, burying her face in his chest. Sobs racked though her body as joy set fire to the emptiness the grief had possessed. He tightened his grip around her, and she sighed in contentment. This,
kneeling on the ground in the warm winds of a harsh desert world, felt like home.

Rey felt the heat of his breath on her neck as he bowed his head into the embrace. The warmth of it tingled over her bare skin. His lips brushed the juncture where her neck met her shoulder. It was soft and tentative, but her heart fluttered all the same. She couldn’t control the shudder that ran through her body. The joyful relief was still there, but it was evolving into something more heated. His touch set fire to her skin. When his lips found her waiting skin again, this time more deliberate, there was something that immediately dropped and tightened low in her belly. She inhaled sharply, her fingers twisting into the material of his shirt around his shoulders to draw him closer, but her head tilted back to better read his emotions.

Ben lifted his head to study her as well, his eyes dark. Her stare dropped to his parted lips that had only seconds ago awakened something in her, making her breath quicken and her thighs quiver uncontrollably. It was altogether absurd how this odd sensation overwhelmed her…and excited her. Before she could say a single word, he had leaned down, closing the distance between them. Her breath caught as her eyes found his and the war within them. The softness was still there, but it was sharpening into a feverishness that threatened to break free—a darkness that screamed need in its intensity. All at once her heart was in her throat as he leaned closer. Her fear melted away as their breath coalesced in the shrinking space between them. Rey leaned forward just enough to feel the softest brush of his lips against hers.

She whimpered.

*Force, I forgot how much I missed this.*

Her entire body was alight with a pleasant tingling, as if electricity sparked across every last nerve ending. It was soft, tentative, and careful, just as it had been when his hand had first touched hers. His arm gripped her tightly to him in yearning, but he allowed her to take what she wanted at her own pace. There was a tension growing inside her that she had no clue how to remedy. It was all too much and not enough.

Rey knew he could give her so much more. Her arms coiled around the back of his neck, pulling him deeper into the kiss, drawing out the darkness. She could almost feel his restraint snap as his untamed passion was unleashed. Her heart stuttered as his gentleness faded, her darkness feeding on his touch. What had once been soft caresses and shuddered breaths, was all at once teeth and nails, needy and desperate.

She melted in his arms, lowering herself to the soft sand underneath him. Ben caught his weight as she dragged him down with her. Resting on his forearms, dark hair illuminated by moonlight, the change in position only served to awaken the hunger in his touch. The tingling through her body ignited into an inferno as he positively devoured her. She twisted her fingers into his clothes
Rey lost herself to the warmth of his mouth and the exploration of her hands in his hair until an intense pulse of energy passed between their lips. She gasped. He groaned, and that feral sound that vibrated from his throat instantly became her favorite sound in the galaxy. Liquid heat shot through her veins, and she thought she just might burn alive. Ben jerked suddenly, his grip loosening as if he had only then realized that it was not just a fantasy in his head, that he had given in to a side of himself that he had once strictly forbidden himself to indulge. When he pulled away, lips swollen, she tightened her grip around his neck, twisting her fingers into his hair. Her lips followed his so she could feel their warmth again, but he remained just out of reach. The only sound in the night was their ragged breaths, and it threatened to destroy her.

“Rey…” he whispered, and there was awe laced with concern in his voice that broke the trance she had fallen under. When she looked up at him, his eyes were wide and directed over her shoulder. She followed his line of sight. The sand around them was hovering, as if they were caught in a dense sandstorm that had been frozen in place. Then she realized that she and Ben—wrapped together in a mess of limbs and disorderly fabric—were also hovering. Before she could think, panic overwhelmed her senses, and they all succumbed to gravity. There were several metallic thuds inside the ship, as well as beeps of alarm, and Rey realized the droids must have been hovering as well.

Ben did his best to avoid crushing her under his considerable mass, his palms landing on either side of her head. He rolled to the side, heaving breathlessly through a deep, carefree laugh. Before that night she had heard this unburdened laugh only once—in his memories, at a Jedi temple—and feared that part of him had been lost forever. She changed her mind. *This* was her favorite sound in the entire galaxy. Her laughter joined his in the still night as tears shined in her eyes.

After a string of angry binary chatter inside, the boarding ramp was lowered. Gee-Bee didn’t come storming out looking for someone to shock with her electro-shock prod—one of her favorite pastimes—so Rey took that as a win. Ben turned on his side, propping himself up on his arm as he watched her. The look in his eyes was…reverent. He could convey an entire holobook in his eyes alone. They may no longer have a bond, but everything she needed to know was in those gold-flecked irises. Biting her thumbnail, she scrunched her nose under his attention, glancing away at the moonlit horizon. Life with Ben certainly wouldn’t be boring. At least he knew about the Force; he could teach her to control it. They would need it. She could only imagine what would happen if they tried…other things.

It was absurd how bubbly and light her entire body felt. She didn’t know if it was possible to die of happiness, but she could have right then. “This doesn’t feel real.”
“No, it doesn’t,” he replied, leaning back into the sand. “I feel like I’ll wake up alone any second. Maybe I’m still dead.”

It frightened her still—that she would wake up, and it wouldn’t be real. She had dreamt of an entire life in the Force; what if it had happened again? Her only reassurance was the Force itself. It told her that whatever this was, it was real. It was comforting that, wherever they were, they were together. “Then we’re both dead.”

He sighed in contentment. Rey studied his profile as he studied the night sky above him. Ben had always found a temporary peace staring up at the vastness of space, and she wondered what he thought about as his mind drifted among the stars. “If this is death, I wish I had died a long time ago,” he murmured.

It was still a difficult subject for her. What she had suffered after his death—it was something she thought she would overcome immediately after his return, but she hadn’t. The nightmares were unrelenting. The first few moments after she awoke to his empty side of the bed every morning—when she couldn’t remember whether or not she lived in a galaxy without Ben Solo—were agonizing. Her struggles would likely last long after she woke up beside him every morning, an arrangement she had every intention of realizing soon. Rey couldn’t imagine anything more satisfying than waking up next to the man she loved. After waiting her entire life for him, it was all she wanted. It was all she had prayed for when he had lain at the bottom of that escape craft. What had nearly become her permanent reality was still painful to admit. And now he talked about it as if it were nothing. “You were dead, Ben.”

“I think death only counts if I had stayed dead,” he said simply, eyes still focused above them. If she had died, she knew he wouldn’t be so indifferent. And though she knew there was levity to his words, her thoughts were far more serious.

If he could speak about it so casually, then she believed she deserved more answers. “Why didn’t your body disappear...into the Force?”

He shook his head. The fact that he died didn’t make him uncomfortable, but evidently what had happened after did. Was he hiding something? Was he afraid it would hurt her? “I don’t remember much from that moment,” he answered quietly. “My mother came for me, but I refused to go with her. I didn’t become one with the Force. When I connected my soul to those dice, I was stuck somewhere in between. I could see you, I could hear you, but I couldn’t talk to you. I felt closest to you when you went to the World Between Worlds, like I could almost reach out and touch you, but you were on the other side of this...wall.”

Had he been there? Had she had a chance to save him then and spare them both months of heartache? Or had the objects she had been holding in her hands the entire time been the only way
to bring him back? If she never gave them back to him, would he still be gone? If anything happened differently, would they be sitting there together? It was terrifying to consider. “Then you remember it?” she whispered, remembering the name he called out in his final moments. *Death,* she refused to add. “Before I saved you?”

He nodded, swallowing heavily.

“Did you see them?” She thought of the people who would have been there to greet him, the people who had helped *her* save him—his grandfather, his grandmother, Luke, Jacen, Dev, Chewie, his mother...his father, the same people he had tried for years to forget. Had they made amends? Had he found peace with them?

A swift succession of emotions twisted across his features. A spark of recognition passed over his eyes as they lost focus, his mind traveling somewhere far away. His only answer was a fragile smile. Rey didn’t intrude on his private moment. She only hoped he finally had happy family memories, whatever short amount of time he’d had to spend with them.

*Does he wish he had more?*

“Do you...” she swallowed, “Do you regret that I brought you back?” He was quiet for a moment, his gaze still undoubtedly focused on something across space and time. As the silenced stretched, she feared the answer she would receive.

“Never,” he whispered. “I will see them again, one day. Maybe by then, I’ll be ready. But right now, I have the rest of my life to spend with you and the kid. There was no peace for me there; all I wanted was to come back to you.”

It wasn’t something she had considered before—that he wanted to come back as profoundly as she had wanted him back. If it had been his only desire, then Rey couldn’t help but wonder. “Did you try?”

“I tried, but I didn’t know how,” he said, his eyes still distant. “I never cared about living in my entire life as strongly as I did after I died. I think the only reason the Cosmic Force let me come back was because it was tired of me raising hell to get to you. Screaming into oblivion was bound to irritate someone.”

Rey imagined it then; Ben Solo fighting across space and time to get back to her. It was comforting
to know that he had fought as hard to come back to her as she had to bring him back. Perhaps the Force righted its wrong when it realized they would never stop until they were together again. The Force never should have doubted their love for each other. She would never doubt it again. “I guess that’s why the Force took you instead of me. If I died, you would have burned down half of the galaxy by now, I’m sure.”

Ben hummed. His toned deepened to something dark, but oddly…thrilling. “Oh, sweetheart, you underestimate me. I would have burned the entire galaxy by now.”

She was rewarded with his mirthful stare. When they had first met, the intensity of the raw emotions in his eyes terrified her, because she could see the truth in them. Now, his gaze meant that everything was right in the galaxy. “No, you wouldn’t,” she said with a smile. He returned her smile with a dimpled grin of his own.

“No, I wouldn’t.”

Rey shifted to lie next to him under the stars. The first time they had studied the sky side-by-side, she had pled with the Force for a day when the war was over for them to be together. At the time, it seemed impossible to imagine a moment when they wouldn’t be on the opposite side of a war. It had never crossed her mind that the next time she studied the stars in his arms, he would be lying lifeless on the bottom of an escape craft as she begged the Force to bring him back. Though it was all she wanted, his return had seemed impossible then. The last time they had studied the stars together, he hadn’t been Ben at all. She had begged for the Force to return the man she loved. Every time they had studied the stars together, it had seemed impossible to imagine a day she would have him like she wanted. It had seemed impossible to imagine until the moment that Carbonite slab containing Sidious tumbled down the creature’s throat. Now that she had everything she had begged for, she never wanted to lose it again. “I won’t burn down the galaxy,” she said. “But if you leave me like that again, I swear to the Cosmic Force Ben, I’ll…I’ll do something you hate…like…marry Poe.”

His smile widened. Her breath hitched as he turned from where he sat next to her to cage her against the sand. His boldness was new, but exciting. “No, you won’t,” he murmured, dark eyes locked on hers.

“No, I won’t,” she admitted as she stared up at him. Moonlight haloed his dark, raven hair. It looked so touchable. “But if you die, I’ll just bring you back again.”

“That I don’t doubt,” he chuckled.
“I love you, Ben Solo.” Rey reached up and twirled her fingers through the ends of his hair. “I’ve loved you before, I love you now, and I’ll love you for a million more lifetimes. All I want is you and that little boy. We both need you here with us. So promise me you’ll stay until we’re old and wrinkled and you have lost all this perfect hair.”

His smile became more fragile. There was a split-second when she thought he would withdraw into himself again, when she would be left wondering what was wrong, but he stayed. With a shuddering exhale, he gave her the insight into his mind she was hoping for. “I’m terrified, Rey, that one day you’ll wake up and won’t want that anymore. You won’t want me.”

“Then I’ll prove every day that you’re wrong,” she said. “Ben, I know the voice in your head is gone, but the damage it did isn’t. They didn’t show you enough that you were wanted. They failed you, but I won’t. Even on the days I struggle with darkness.” Rey swiped his hair from his face so she could see his eyes. She saw the significance of his question in his stare, and she hoped he saw the sincerity in hers.

“I don’t know what future the Force holds for me, and I wish I could promise I’ll never leave you until we’re old and wrinkled, but I can promise I’ll never lose hope in that dream. I’ll fight for it every day, even on the days I struggle with my darkness,” he said, and she felt from the depths of the Force that it was the truth, Ben would never willingly leave her. “I could even go cut my hair right now if you—”

“No!” Rey dragged her fingernails against his scalp and through his raven locks, a little more roughly than she had intended. “I love your hair.” He lowered his head to her shoulder, sighing in contentment. She couldn’t help but mirror his sentiment. Rey knew the road before them would not be an easy one. They would both battle with the damage done by their pasts, they would both falter under darkness, they would struggle to raise a child in a galaxy that hated Ben and her by proxy. But she believed in that future she had seen in the hut on Ahch-To. With a smile, she remembered the vision she had seen; the vision she had shown Ben the night his mother died.

There were only brief snippets of a future, but the emotions were clear. She knew then the feelings she felt for this man were not meant for an enemy. The first flash was sand…then snow…a lake…then trees…his open palm, bare and outstretched…him standing beside Finn and Poe, weapon raised…her head on his shoulder…lightning…him standing to face Snoke…his carefree smile…ink written carefully on parchment…deft fingers switching the Falcon’s controls…a boy’s laugh…a pair of dice exchanging hands…a twin sunrise…an indigo-hued kiss…his eyes bright with love, purpose, and hope…and a blue, crossguard lightsaber. The emotions of the brief flashes were bright and hopeful. She had believed then that they would never have to be alone again.

She had been right.
There had been nothing clear that was proof he would turn—or when—it had only showed her a future that inspired hope. It had validated the feelings that she had been developing for him, convincing her that, if she went to him, he would turn. It had been enough to inspire her to leave the last hope of the Resistance on an abandoned island and cross the galaxy for a man she had once called a monster. “I’m surprised Luke hasn’t appeared yet,” she said, remembering the catalyst that had sparked her journey.

“Should I be disturbed that you’re thinking of him right now?” he huffed into her shoulder, his voice muffled.

She hummed, dragging her nails against his scalp again. “We are on his homeworld…and I’m touching you. It sounds like a time he would show up.”

Ben shifted onto his stomach on the sand and tilted his face to stare up at her. “He would, but we might have scared him off with our earlier…display.”

“Nothing exploded, so I don’t think he saw,” she answered. That evoked more of Ben’s carefree laughter, and Rey knew she would never tire of the way his dimples transformed his face. There were few recognizable similarities between this man and the former Supreme Leader or the troubled young man he had been before. His anger and fear toward his family had lessened tremendously. His energy in the Force was still steady despite his words. In fact, his energy in the Force was…strong. When had that changed? Why had it changed? What did it mean?

Ben must have seen the shock in the furrow of her brow or her slight gasp, because he shifted to his knees, staring down at her in concern. “Rey, what’s wrong?” She couldn’t focus on his words; she was too distracted by what she felt.

He couldn’t…could he?

Testing the theory that had just crashed over her like a bucket of cold water, Rey sat up and sifted her fingers through the sand. She gathered two stones in her palm. With a flick of her wrist, she sent one stone skipping across the smooth sand, leaving small divots in its wake. As Ben turned to follow the path of the stone, she directed the other one at the back of his head. For a split-second, she believed she was wrong, that the stone would hit him. But when it was nearly upon him, he pivoted as his hand came up to protect his face.

The bond was still a gaping wound in her mind, and she distinctly remembered feeling nothing from him in the Force since she had arrived. There was never a moment when she felt a change in him and yet…the stone hovered in air, centimeters from his hand, then dropped harmlessly to the
sand. His eyes followed its descent and stayed there, his expression awed.

Rey waited, anxious for his reaction. If his sensitivity had returned, would it return to the way it had been before? Could he control it, or would it only respond to instinctual reactions? Would he even be happy that it returned, considering the fact he had never wanted the Force? The silence stretched between them. She felt tentative pushes and pulls in the Force as he tested the power, but, otherwise, there was no discernible reaction.

It was difficult to feel his full strength in the Force without the bond, as well as the interference of Tatooine’s magnetic field, but she could easily sense his energy again, so it was powerful enough. However strong the energy had become, it was surprisingly calm.

Life would have been easier for him without it, but Rey was grateful that they shared its energy again. She only hoped he would feel the same. Still, she did her best to control her own reaction to the comfort of feeling him again. This wasn’t about her.

“Ben?”

He shook his head. Rey could only imagine how his thoughts were spiraling. She allowed him to come to terms with it at his own pace as she considered her own feelings about it. The implications were endless. Ben would undoubtedly tell the council, but she knew Poe would never let them take him away from her. With the implant, the council still had their assurance that he would never hurt anyone again. She knew he would prove them all wrong. And this didn’t change anything for her; she loved him, with or without the Force. So did Dev. The question that haunted her the most after his Force returned was not how it would change him, but why hadn’t the bond returned too?

“How did you break the bond?” she asked when he finally turned to look at her.

*Can it come back, too?*

He shrugged, eyes wet with emotion. “I just thought about how much I love you.”

*I have never heard of breaking a bond,* Luke had told her. *It would take a strength more powerful than the Force itself.*

Rey was prepared to tell him what Luke had said, but two things happened simultaneously; there
was a very human cry from inside the Falcon, and Ben’s comlink beeped with a message from Blue. Dev. Despite the distance and the planet’s magnetic fields, she felt his fear. Her mind immediately flashed to the worst scenarios possible. What if someone—someone who hated the Skywalkers as obsessively as Sidious did—was trying to hurt him?

Rey jumped to her feet and sprinted up the boarding ramp before logic caught up with her. Both droids were expressing their displeasure with their little flight when she burst through the blast door, but she focused on the boy sleeping down the hall. Her stomach jumped to her throat and panic paralyzed her senses as she found the sheets disturbed but the bunk empty.

“Ben, he’s gone!” she shouted. As her mind reeled with the shock, Ben slid to her side. When she turned to him, hyperventilating, she was surprised to find that he didn’t look nearly as frightened as he should be.

He smiled and tilted his head for her to follow him down the corridor. “A few days after we left Bespin, we landed in Salis D’aar on Bakura to refuel and…get some supplies. He was overwhelmed because he had never seen trees before, and there were so many lifeforms, so I found him a place to hide. Now he goes there whenever he doesn’t feel safe.” He knocked three times on a panel that looked like a solid wall. He opened it, then slid away a false floor inside. Staring down into the compartment, Ben smiled. “Hey, kid. It’s safe now.”

The past six months had been unbearable for Rey…no, not unbearable, though it had felt so at times in those hours right before the sun rose. It had been difficult without him. When she found him on Tatooine and discovered he remembered, what she had been through without him had felt purposeless. Watching him with the boy now, she understood why the Force had kept them apart. She had learned so much about herself on her own, and his absence had helped her define exactly what he meant to her.

Rey knew the time had been significant for him as well. What he had accomplished personally, fighting through his darkness to prevail, was nothing less than incredible. Throughout his struggle, however, there was constant interference from her and the bond. Ben still needed time to relearn exactly who he was...without her.

As she watched him with that little boy, she realized that maybe he needed to face becoming a father alone, too. Ben knew nothing about raising children, except for the misgivings he had from his upbringing. He had a difficult time allowing anyone in. She could imagine what it had been like for him to be thrown into a new, terrifying, unknown situation—with a stranger who relied entirely on him…alone. He had undoubtedly struggled, but it had been good for him. He had become an expert in everything Dev, and he’d done it on his own. He had proven to himself that he was worthy. The relationship that had developed between the two was beautiful, and it made every moment they had been apart worth it.
Waiting for the boy to crawl his way out of the hiding place, she noticed containers full of parts in the back of the compartment. “Ben, what are those?”

“They’re…parts,” he said, shifting his weight uncomfortably before he turned to meet her gaze. “For a speeder.”

“That looks like—”

“Everything to assemble one?” He smiled shyly as he said it, and her heart fluttered at the sight. She didn’t know if she would ever become accustomed to his smile; she would certainly never tire of it. “It is,” he continued, “I thought, if you did meet me at the parole hearing…if you chose to stay with me…then you’d want to rebuild one, likw you said in the dream. So, I paid a Chagrian on Salis D’aar to disassemble a working one for me.”

“I wish I could have seen their face.” He snorted and turned back to the compartment, and Rey couldn’t help the smile that bloomed both on her cheeks and in her heart. Ben would never know what those speeder parts meant to her. It meant enough that he remembered, but that he had gone to the trouble of gathering the parts, that he had believed they would be together again, told her everything she needed to know about his feelings for her.

Ben offered his hand to the hidden compartment, and miniature fingers wrapped his thumb. He pulled the small boy up out of the hole. Dev’s eyes found hers almost immediately. Ben knelt next to Dev, his fingers still grasped tightly in the boy’s hand. “Hey kid, this is—”

“I know you,” the boy said, eyes as wide and emotional as Ben’s were. “I’ve seen you in my dreams.”

Rey smiled. “I’ve seen you, too.”

“My name is Dev,” he said proudly. He shook her hand, and it wasn’t the strength of his handshake, but the strength of his energy that surprised her. It was far too strong for someone who wasn’t Force-sensitive. It was brave and kind and wise far beyond his years. It reminded her of another energy she had met once in a dream. “But it’s not my ‘before’ name,” Dev continued. “My ‘before’ name was DV-2187. Ben has a ‘before’ name too—Kylo Ren.”

Ben shook his head. “Kylo Ren was my made-up name. Ben is my real name.”
“Is Dev my real name?” the boy asked, looking to Ben.

“Yes, it’s very special. It’s a family name,” Ben assured him in that tone that suggested anyone would be crazy to believe otherwise. “So is Solo. You have every right to it, because you’re family.” The boy beamed with a dimpled smile that Rey knew well. Rey tried to fight back tears. Ben had said his name was his “real” name; he had referred to Solo as his “family name.” It was everything she could have ever hoped for when he had told her “Ben Solo is dead.” This was the man she knew he could be.

“You can be just like me,” she told the boy. “My real name is Rey, because that’s who I am. But that’s not my ‘before’ name either. Not too long ago, I had a chance to know my ‘before’ name, but I didn’t want to, because I like this name better.”

“I like this name better, too,” Dev decided with a nod, then he grabbed Ben by the shirt, pulled him further down to his level, and whispered loudly. “I like her.”

“I like her, too,” Ben said, ruffling the boy’s hair. “Now let’s get you back to bed.”

“Can Rey come, too?” The boy’s eyes met hers, and she nodded enthusiastically, opening her hand.

Dev began dragging her away before Ben responded, but she heard him behind her. “Sure thing, kid.” For a moment, she could have sworn it was Han behind her. Rey’s smiled widened. She could only imagine how cocky Han would be to hear his son sound so much like him. Wherever he was, she was certain he was smiling, too.

“You had a chance to know your ‘before’ name?” Ben asked when he finally caught up to them.

“Yes, when Poe and I went to Jakku in search of Force Destiny. It was hidden in an underground compound on Tuanul the entire time, the entrance was guarded by the man that you…” She almost said it. She almost said the man you killed. What would that have done to Dev? “…well, you know.”

“You can say it,” he whispered as Dev dragged her through the Falcon. “The kid knows. It’s the truth.”
As Dev skipped through the corridor, he picked up a glass off a high counter to examine it, then set it back on the edge. Ben caught it when it fell as he walked behind the boy. The fluidity of the interaction implied experience, and Rey couldn’t help but smile. “Ben did bad things because he listened to a bad man’s voice in his head,” the boy announced loudly. “That’s why we can’t go to some places in my holobooks. But he’s a good guy, now; I can tell. Sometimes I just know if someone is good or bad. You’re good, too. That statue man is bad.”

Rey’s suspicion grew. “What do you mean, you know if someone is good or bad?”

The boy shrugged. “I don’t know, I just…feel it.”

Rey exchanged a glance with Ben. She knew he feared the boy’s Force sensitivity. If Dev did have it, she hoped Ben realized it would be different. They could help him in ways his parents could not. They both had the Force, they both knew the power of the darkness; they both could teach him. She didn’t say anything, however, because Ben was still coming to terms with his own Force-sensitivity. There was something about the boy’s energy that told her he was strong in the Force, but they would have to wait to leave Tatooine to find out.

“So the entrance to the compound was guarded by the man I killed, Lor San Tekka?” Ben prompted.

“Yes, though I don’t understand: if they had just destroyed it instead of guarding it, they could have prevented everything.” She turned to him in search of insight but found his eyes alight with mirth instead.

“I may have changed many of my opinions since we met on Takodana,” Ben huffed, “but not my opinions of the Jedi.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter now,” she said with a shake of her head. “We found the hidden compound, and inside Beebee downloaded data from the terminals with information on a program Sidious ran there. That was why my parents brought me there, I was in that program. He killed all the children that were Force-sensitive, but your grandfather helped me escape. That introduced me to the World Between Worlds—”

“Where you walked through a portal and found me in my dreams, and then my grandfather brought me to yours, bonding us. Love was the only weapon he had against Sidious.” Rey turned to him, eyes wide with a look that said we’re talking about this later. That was it then – they were bonded
through the World Between Worlds. It had proven to be a bond stronger than death, only broken by the power of love. It seemed fitting since it had been his grandfather’s love for his family that helped create it. His grandfather had told him, then – the truth of their bond. She wondered what else his grandfather had told him. Had he known the war would cost Ben his life? Had he known she wouldn’t give up on Ben?

For so long, she had searched for the missing pieces that revealed the complete picture of her destiny. The last pieces were finally falling into place and she could see just how connected they were. Even without the bond, their fates had always been interwoven into one destiny. Dev continued to pull her through the corridor, but her eyes were focused on Ben. “You said you found you name,” he prompted after a long moment.

Rey blinked, forcing herself back into the present. “Yes, right, my parents were supposed to make money off me if I got ‘accepted’ into Sidious’s program,” she continued, “so I guess when I escaped, that’s partly why my parents left me. The file had my former name, my parents' names, my birthdate, my homeworld…but I didn’t want to see it. The file was destroyed with Force Destiny and everything else in the underground compound.”

Ben stumbled and then stood frozen in shock. She turned and followed Dev to his bunk, waiting for Ben to catch up. He was at her side far quicker than she had anticipated. “Rey, that’s…when I first met you…why would you destroy it?”

“I realized it’s time to let the past die,” she answered with a smile, and his eyes swelled with pride. They both knew how far she had come. Everything she had done for most of her life had been in search of a name that would define her. Ben had pushed her to realize that she didn’t need one to find relevance and belonging, just as she had pushed him to realize that the name he carried didn’t define him; he could create his own fate. And he had. “It doesn’t matter who we were,” she said. “This is who we are.”

“Rey’s smart,” Dev decided as he climbed up on his bunk.

“Why do you think I like her so much?” Ben answered, but his eyes were focused on her. There was something heated in his eyes that told her he would have kissed her right then if the boy hadn’t been there.

“I thought you liked her because she kicked your butt,” the boy said as he stood up, bouncing on the bed.

Ben’s eyes didn’t leave hers as he laughed. “That, too.” His voice lowered to something soft and
I’m proud of you, too, she pushed into the emptiness of their bond out of habit, before she realized her mistake. She mouthed the words instead.

“You love her,” Dev intoned as he continued jumping.

“I do,” Ben answered as he reached his arm out and scooped the boy off the bed. Dev giggled as Ben wrestled him with one hand and lifted the sheets with the other. In one movement, he slid the boy under the sheets. He turned to pick up a gray blanket from the floor. In the time Ben had turned, Dev had climbed out from under the sheets. Rey leaned back against the wall, arms crossed, as she watched their interaction. Dev bounced to the end of the bed where she stood.

“Do you love him?” he asked her. It was less curious and almost protective.

“Dev,” Ben growled, but there wasn’t any anger behind it.

“More than all the stars in the entire galaxy,” Rey answered. Dev smiled the split-second before Ben yanked him backward. He wrestled Dev under the sheets and placed his large hands on either of the boy’s shoulders to contain him.

“Stay.”

“Can she stay?” Dev asked as he stared up at his father with pleading eyes. His father. Ben still hadn’t said those words yet—perhaps he wasn’t ready—but he was a damn good one. If Dev wanted her to be, she hoped one day she could be just as good a mother.

Rey pushed off the wall and joined Ben at the boy’s side. “Do you want me to stay?”

“Are you good at hide and seek?” Dev asked with a skeptical squint in his eyes. At least, she was partially certain he was squinting under that unruly mop of hair.

She shrugged. “Better than Ben.” Not that it was a great victory. The man had many strengths, but he was not built for hiding. His only hope was if he was clad entirely in black and it was very, very
dark. She imagined him attempting to crawl through the narrow smuggling compartments and giggled.

“That’s not hard,” Dev grumbled.

Ben bit his lip, and Rey knew he was struggling not to smile. “Okay, kid,” he said in a soft, but authoritative tone. “Time for bed.”

“I don’t want to,” the boy whined. “I woke up, and I was floating, and then I fell.”

Ben and Rey shared a furtive glance before Ben replied with a laugh in his voice. “We’ll make sure that doesn’t happen again.”

“I’ve got special powers; if you start floating around here again, I’ll put you right back,” Rey assured him. The boy stared up at her in awe, and she couldn’t help but remember the moments his father had done the same. Her heart was full.

“Promise?”

“Promise,” she whispered.

“Okay,” the boy said, and then he was already on to the next thought. “Do you tell stories? I like stories.”

Rey’s brows pinched in thought. Did she? She couldn’t remember if she’d ever tried. “What kind of stories?”

“Bedtime stories!” the boy answered as if was the most obvious knowledge in the galaxy. Perhaps it was. Rey had never had anyone tuck in her in bed as a child. “Ben tells the best stories—about princesses and smugglers and scavengers and dark knights.”

“Does he?” she smiled, turning with a raised brow to Ben. His expression was unreadable, but she saw the shadow of a smirk on his lips. Rey lowered herself down onto the bunk next to Dev. Rey didn’t know stories of adventure on faraway worlds, but she did know one story, about a family
who had defied the Force itself in the name of love and hope. She knew the story well, because she
had been blessed to be a part of it.

“I think I know one,” she said. “But where do I start?”

“The beginning!” the boy shouted.

Ben settled down behind her and gently removed the tie at her wrist. With a tenderness belying a
man his size, he combed his fingers through her hair. It had always held a deeper meaning for
them, but when he was gone, it had become far more significant when it became a symbol for all
she had lost. For as long as she lived, she would never take it for granted.

Dev stared up at her patiently, and she imagined the traditions she would make with him. Maybe
one day they could look back on the retelling of this story with a deeper meaning as well. It was a
story that had set all three of their paths to collide, after all. “A long, long time ago there was a little
boy named Anakin,” she began as the boy’s small fingers found her hand. As the light swelled
inside her, she sent it through her to Ben’s fingers in her hair and Dev’s fingers in her palm. She
couldn’t remember a more peaceful moment in her entire life. She hummed as Ben twisted her
locks into a braid, before continuing with her story. “Anakin lived on a planet just like this one,
with lots and lots of sand.”

“I love sand,” the boy yawned.
Chapter End Notes

Kiss

Two major characters share a kiss
Fixing the Hyperdrive

Chapter Summary

Explicit Content. Please see warnings.

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“Can I go back to Uncle Luke’s place?” Dev asked with that look that he knew Ben was helpless against. “I found some cool stuff there.

The kid had been up before the sunrise, as he usually was, and had already found too much trouble in the long hours before the sun rose. “No, it’s still dark, and you can’t go alone,” Ben said from his position hovering over the boarding ramp. Eyes closed and legs crossed, he was attempting to meditate as he stacked small stones in the moonlight. He was still testing his powers, but from what he could discern after six months without it, his sensitivity to the Force had been fully restored.
It was strange. There had been no floodgate of energy that suddenly rushed through his senses. He had been…distracted with Rey, but he thought he should have felt something. After feeling nothing from the Force since he died—which was still difficult to admit had happened—he expected the reemergence of the Force would have been something he immediately recognized, like the reemergence of his memories. But it hadn’t been until that pebble hovered centimeters from his face that he realized his sensitivity had returned. He knew Rey had watched him closely for a reaction. The kid had given him an excuse for a distraction, and then Ben had insisted Rey take the Captain’s quarters while he slept in the cockpit. He passed it off as a need to fly them back to the Lars homestead from the Northern Dune Sea, but, mostly, he needed time to think.

The return of his sensitivity induced a strange mixture of emotions. Ben had never wanted the Force. When he had been without it on the Finalizer, however, he realized how much he relied on it. Once he discovered it was gone on Bespin, he was just grateful to be alive. He had survived the last six months without it, and over that time had convinced himself that he was better off without it…without the voices in the darkness. After it returned, his first thoughts centered around his fear of what the boy would think of him when he inevitably struggled with it.

His fears had changed, however, when he felt an energy within Dev. It wasn’t the strength that he felt in Rey, but there was something there. It didn’t necessarily mean sensitivity. Poe Dameron also had a stronger energy than most non-Force-sensitives, but it was unsettling. After the kid revealed that he experienced knowing the intentions of others, Ben wondered if it was intuition or he was studying these individuals through Force sense—one of Ben’s first experiences with the Force as well.

Ben knew he had to face the possibility that Dev would be Force-sensitive. It was a terrifying prospect—one he would never wish on the kid. What bothered him most, however, was why the boy hadn’t told him of his growing powers. He wondered if the kid was suppressing them, or, in the very least, hiding them, because Ben had somehow made him feel ashamed of it. It was his greatest fear.

It didn’t matter anymore if Dev watched him struggle with darkness; what mattered was Dev growing to feel ashamed of his Force powers as Ben had. He knew if he tried to talk to the kid, Dev would deny it. But he also knew the boy was like Ben, and actions spoke louder than words ever could. So, Ben hovered over the boarding ramp, manipulating stones with the Force, to show the kid that Force-sensitivity was not the curse he’d made it out to be.

Ben felt the boy watch him with mild curiosity as he meditated. It helped two-fold. It would normalize the Force for Dev. He would grow accustomed to both Ben and Rey manipulating the Force regularly, so if Dev exhibited more signs of Force-sensitivity, they could begin their lessons early. Ben refused to allow the boy to suffer through it alone, and that was the only reason he was grateful his own sensitivity had returned. It may have reignited his struggle with the darkness, but he would gladly do it if it meant he could be there better for the kid.
That brought him to the second reason the meditation helped. Ben could keep a close watch on the boy through the Force. He waited for a sign: a vein of darkness in the kid’s bright energy, a spike in fearful emotions, any unfamiliar—or terrifyingly familiar—presence that shouldn’t have been there. His meditation revealed nothing, but Ben knew it was the first of many sessions he would spend watching over the boy. He refused to allow a monster in that kid’s mind. His family had given him a second chance. Ben would use it to ensure that what happened to his grandfather and what happened to him—and what the others suffered because of it—would never happen again. He had told Rey he would do everything in his power to stay with them, but if he had to give his life fighting a monster from corrupting Dev’s thoughts, he would do it in a heartbeat. Ben didn’t think Rey would hate him for it, because he had no doubt she would lay down her life for the boy as well. She had fallen in love with Dev as quickly as he had. His heart swelled at the thought.

“I’m bored.” Dev’s voice drew his attention back from his meditation. “What about Blue? Can he take me to Uncle Luke’s place?” There was a sudden proximity warning in the Force, but it didn’t take a sweep in the energy around them to know who had ventured into his personal space.

“I need Blue’s help here,” he said, cracking an eye open to find Dev centimeters from his face. He was surprised he hadn’t sensed the kid by odor alone. The boy truly had no concept of boundaries…or personal hygiene.

Dev huffed dramatically. “What about the crazy droid?” Ben eyed the two droids that were bickering in the sand. They were finding rocks, shoving them into an internal mechanism, and shooting them at each other. Gee-Bee irritated Blue to no end, but Ben had never seen the young droid so playful, either. He would come around eventually.

Ben shook his head. “Gee-Bee has to go to Rey’s TIE fighter to get Rey’s personal effects.”

“She can take me after we go to the fighter together. I can help her; I have arms to carry things,” Dev reasoned, spreading his arms as proof. “Please?”

Ben knew he would bend. He knew he would, because he almost always did. The kid had a way of finding logic in favor of any argument. That was why Ben needed Rey to help balance out his parenting. She had always been better at standing firm by her beliefs, which would come in handy with a kid who was too smart for his own good. “What about your holocall with your uncle?”

“I’ll take the holoprojector with me,” the kid said with a smile, because he knew he had won. “I want to show him Little Lando.”
Little Lando. Ben pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes. The best-case scenario was Lando would *never* let Ben forget this. The worst-case scenario was Lando would call Ben by *that* childhood nickname until he convinced the kid to name the creature something else. “Your uncle will *not* be happy that I let you name that…thing after him.”

“But he’s funny like Uncle Lando!” Dev contended as he pulled the feral, screeching creature from his pack. It was just another reminder of his questionable parenting skills.

Ben could hear Rey walking down the corridor in their direction. Before *he* had the chance to explain, Blue found her first. He beeped happily as he informed Rey that they had found a creature on the ship, and it was now Dev’s new friend. “You are not keeping that,” she said. The droid chirped shortly at her. “What do you mean, ‘he said yes?!’”

Rey burst out of the blastdoor with a ferocity that he not-so-secretly adored. “Blue thinks you told Dev he could keep a Porg.”

Ben lowered himself slowly from where he had been meditating and turned to where she stood at the top of the ramp with her hands on her hips. “What’s a Porg?” he asked, as if he didn’t know.

He knew.

Of course, he knew.

“That thing!” she said pointing to the creature in Dev’s hands.

“Blue probably said that because…it *might* be exactly what I did,” he answered with a shrug. What else was he supposed to do? Say no? The kid would have been heartbroken.

“Ben!”

Ben abandoned his rock pile, allowing them to crash to the boarding ramp with an obnoxiously loud clatter, then stood. “What? He gave me the face!” he said, gesturing to the walking sandstorm that was Dev.
As proof, the kid presented Rey with the pleading face as he hugged the creature to his chest. “It’s an orphan, Rey.”

“Oh, no, that doesn’t work on me, Dev,” she said sternly as she pointed at the kid. Ben smiled. He knew she would be far better at this than he could ever hope to be. “And you,” she said, shifting her stare to Ben. His smile faded immediately. “Did you tell him what to say to guilt me into this?”

Ben shook his head vehemently. “No, he’s that good.” It was the truth. Dev may have inherited his logical side from the Organas and Naberies, but he learned his manipulation skills from his uncle Lando. “You look in that kid’s face and tell him he has to leave his ‘new best friend’ behind, because I won’t,” he said.

“Force, Ben, when did you become so… so…?” She gestured to all of him, so he stared down at himself. What? He wasn’t following. He looked no different than he usually did: clad in all black. Though, in the light, the shirt was more dark grey than black, so maybe she was commenting on that change. “You were the Supreme Leader, master of the Knights of Ren, Jedi Killer; I’m assuming you told people ‘no’ before.” He nodded slowly. Apparently, when she gestured to him, she meant his weakness with the kid. Of course, he’d said no before. Hux especially hated it. This was different, however, this was Dev. Rey narrowed her eyes in irritation as if there was no hope Ben would be capable of anything else. He would give them anything. He had already tried to give her the galaxy; what made her think he would be any better at this?

“But you can’t say ‘no’ to a…” She turned to the boy. “Dev, how old are you?” The kid shrugged with his arms wrapped firmly around the creature. “How old do you want to be?”

Dev smiled. “Five.”

“You can’t say no to a five-year-old?” she asked with a huff, as if it was a simple thing to do. “When did you become so…” When she looked up at him, Rey still didn’t finish her question, but her expression softened. A smile twitched across her lips, and he could feel the warmth of her energy surround him in the Force. With a sigh, she rubbed her hand over her brow. “Do you have any idea what these things do to wiring?”

“If it destroys something…I’ll fix it,” he said. A compromise. Wasn’t that what Lando had talked about?

Rey raised a brow skeptically, but the shadow of the smile hadn’t faded. “What if it can’t be fixed by hitting it?”
“Well, you can fix anything,” he reminded her with a wink. “You’ve stolen enough training from me; I think I can return the favor.”

The brightness in Rey’s eyes faded. “Can you even do that…without the bond?”

Ben shrugged. “You implanted memories, why not skills?” Rey seemed to accept his answer, but her thoughts drifted away with her gaze. He knew she still struggled with the loss of their bond. Even when he was standing right in front of her, there was an emptiness in her mind where their bond once had been. He knew that, because he felt the matching emptiness in his own mind. It was easier to manage now that they were together. The emptiness was far more tolerable than the ever-present ache of the wound left behind when she wasn’t there.

Ben knew she was disappointed that the bond hadn’t been restored with the Force, but he refused to be. The Force had given him a second chance at life, a real life, a life the voices had convinced him would never be possible. The Force had given him Dev and brought Rey back to him. The Force had given him his sensitivity back to ensure that he could help Dev change the narrative of the Skywalker bloodline. The silence was deafening at times. He missed the intimacy of her voice in his head, but the Force had already given him more than he deserved.

“I’ll take care of him,” Dev announced, sensing that their thoughts had drifted. “I’ll give him food and water and fix what he breaks! He’s all alone and he needs me! I love him, and he loves me! Please, can I keep him? He’s my best friend!”

Rey sighed as the boy stared up at her with pleading eyes, holding the creature to his chest. She was right. Ben knew that, and he didn’t want to make her out to be the “mean” one. His mother had always told his father that they needed to be on “the same side.” They never were, but he could give Dev what he’d never had; he could ensure he and Rey were always on the same side. At least in front of the kid. He and Rey would argue—he wasn’t naïve enough to believe they wouldn’t—but he wouldn’t put the kid in the middle. Ben knelt next to Dev. “All right, listen, kid, what if…” he started, but Rey interrupted him.

“One Porg, Dev.” She said it to the boy, but her eyes were focused on Ben. Compromise. The boy giggled in excitement and hugged her first, then Ben. The former Supreme Leader tried his best to hide his smile. Those eyes got him every time. It was nice to know they had the same effect on her. At least he wasn’t alone in this "parenting" thing.

Dev rocked the creature back and forth against him. “I named him ‘Little Lando.’”
“I’m sure Lando will be thrilled,” Rey replied sarcastically.

Ben turned toward the boy and gestured toward Rey. “See, kid? I told you.” When he laughed, imagining Lando’s face, he became hyperaware of Rey’s stare. He thought it would bother him—her fixation with his smile and laugh—but the warmth he felt from her whenever he smiled was worth it.

Dev nodded, but he clearly wasn’t paying attention anymore. “So…can I go?”

Ben closed his eyes to orient himself with the energy in the Force around them. There was not another creature nor craft for kilometers; he knew the kid would be safe. As profoundly as he wanted to shelter Dev from the galaxy, he knew he couldn’t. With a sigh of resignation, he said, “Go with Gee-Bee, take a blaster and the holoprojector, and no more eating strange food you find on the floor.”

“Deal,” the boy shouted over his shoulder as he took off down the boarding ramp to Gee-Bee.

As they watched the kid disappear into the darkness of the early morning hours, Ben felt Rey join him at his side. When it had been just him and Dev, he had missed her terribly, but he had been okay. He had gained the strength to carry on each day, because he knew she was happy. Now that he had her back, however, it was like taking the first gasp of cold, crisp air after holding his breath underwater for too long. He felt complete in ways he never could without her and found a peace not even death provided.

The sweet lilt of Rey’s voice drew him from his thoughts. “You’ll have to say ‘no’ sometimes; you know that, don’t you?”

Ben opened his eyes to find her staring at him. “I do say ‘no.’ All the time,” he insisted. “Yesterday, he wanted to play with a lightsaber. I only let him press the ignition. And last week I said ‘no’ when he fired up the Falcon all on his own after watching me do it one time and begged me to let him fly her. I didn’t. I only let him ease in the throttle.”

She snorted as she rested her head against him. “That’s…a start. We’ll work on it.”

He nodded. It was a reasonable request to work on. Sometimes he got so caught up in wanting to give the kid everything that he forgot to consider whether he should. It wasn’t difficult to remember that he’d had "everything" as a child…except for the important things. What mattered
was he gave Dev the important things. Lando had told him the same thing: "no" was okay, "no" was healthy, even if Dev was upset afterward. Ben would just have to practice saying "no" with his back turned, so Dev couldn’t give him that face.

With Gee-Bee and Dev off on their adventure in the pre-dawn darkness, Blue rolled up the boarding ramp.

“Hello, Blue,” Rey said hesitantly, and Ben wondered if she still blamed herself for what had happened. The astromech, his only friend for countless lonely nights, was polite in kind. The droid was wary of her and what the change would mean for their own friendship, but Ben could tell that Blue’s deeply emotive personality would help foster a good relationship with Rey. Ben had spoken at length to the droid about his feelings toward Rey, about how deeply he missed her, and the droid seemed to genuinely understand when he explained the pain of missing someone. Though he had his reservations, the droid seemed happy for him that his waiting was over. Blue would fall in love with Rey just as he did; Ben was sure of it.

“All right,” he said to the astromech before turning toward the Falcon, “Let’s get started on that hyperdrive.”

Rey stopped on their ascent up the ramp. “Excuse me?”

“Ah, yes, we fell out of primary hyperspace when we reached the Tatoo system,” he said, waving away her concern. “With this old piece of junk, it just might take a couple of good kicks to get it back online again.”

“Force, Ben, you sound like your father.” Her assertion, surprisingly, didn’t bother him. Quite the opposite, in fact. He felt that odd, weightless feeling in his chest again when he turned and caught sight of her smile. It was the same feeling as when his ship entered an atmosphere at too steep of an angle, though not nearly as dangerous. He could have never imagined how different it would be without a war between them.

It had been a foreign concept to comprehend at first—a life without war—without anything to fight for or against. Those endless days in space, while lonely, did wonders in starting him on a path of healing. It was relatively simple to learn how to care for the kid. Though terrifying in its own way, it was still safer than introspection.

After the boy went to sleep, however, he was left with little else to do but think…and learn. For the first time in his entire life, he was influenced by only the voice in his own head, and it was enlightening. Without the Force, neither the darkness or light had influenced him. He was learning
who he was—for better or worse—not who he thought he should be or what anyone else wanted him to be.

The boy jumpstarted Ben’s path toward allowing himself to be vulnerable, because Dev *needed* him to be. Sentiment wasn’t a weakness, and neither was family. While Ben admittedly had a long path to walk before he could be as confident and reassuring and trusting in himself as a typical parent, what barriers he’d created that hadn’t been broken down by Rey had fallen to Dev.

It took him longer to accept that he could allow himself to feel fully without consequence. With only time to occupy him, he slowly allowed himself to feel without guilt or subversion. He had stopped lying to himself, had stopped fighting who he was, and only then did he find his peace. After actively attempting—and failing miserably—to suppress his love for Rey for so long, it was odd but relieving just to feel openly around someone without fear. Now that the Force had returned, it would complicate things, but he was grateful he’d learned what he did without it.

Even if there was no longer a bond that Rey could use to sense his emotions, he knew she could see it in his eyes and his occasional smile…could sense it in his energy. From the second he met her, he turned into a damn fool when he was around her, but he loved it, weightless feeling and all. Realizing she was still staring at him, studying his face, he tried to remember what they were talking about before he was distracted by her smile. *The hyperdrive.* “I haven’t gotten around to fixing it yet,” he said.

“Why didn’t you fix it with all this spare time you had? It’s not like you were busy with a *child.*” There it was, that smile again. She had to stop doing that if she expected him to function.

Ben knew why he had come here, but he hadn’t quite determined why he’d stayed. He could have fixed the issue the moment they landed and sent Sidious to hell that first night, but instead he insisted on waiting. Every day he made another excuse as to why he couldn’t fix it. Perhaps he knew that, once it was fixed, he would have no other reason to stay.

He had never in his wildest dreams imagined that Rey would find him there, but he had delayed his departure all the same. While the re-emergence of his sensitivity to the Force was new—something he was almost certain coincided with the kiss he shared with Rey—perhaps the Force had been influencing him on his journey more than he had thought. Perhaps it was the Force’s will that convinced him to stay, so Rey could find him there.

The extended stay served as a means to finish other necessary tasks as well. Ben would carry the wounds left behind by his missing family for the rest of his life. He would be forever grateful for what the Force had granted him in the afterlife. There were words of love from his mother…words of pride from Luke…words of wisdom from Anakin…the tearful reunion with Jacen and Dev…but the words that affected him most were the words of forgiveness from his father.
Though he was able to say what needed to be said to the people who needed to hear it, he still struggled with the grief when he awoke. Creating those grave markers had been cathartic—his way of remembering the ones he’d hurt and lost. The burden he’d carried had lightened after that. He had his chance to say goodbye. He had found a way to carry them all with him but still gain his own peace. Perhaps that was another reason the Force had wanted him to stay. “I could have, but I didn’t want to,” he answered. “I wasn’t ready to leave yet.”

Rey nodded slowly, waiting for him to continue. When he didn’t, he expected her to pry further, but instead, she grinned. “Let’s get started then,” she said and sauntered away into the bowels of the *Falcon*.

Ben watched her go, then turned to the droid at his side. “Blue, I need you to connect to the hyperdrive computer terminal. Tell me how to get this thing back online.”

By the time he reached the location of the hyperdrive control panel, Rey had already pulled the durasteel grate from the floor and climbed down into the compartment. Ben climbed down after her, realizing only when he was fully inside the compartment how narrow it was. Rey had her back to him as she worked, but he noticed her tense when he stepped down from the last rung of the ladder. He cleared his throat awkwardly. It was abnormally warm down there, which didn’t help when his breathing already sounded too loud in the confined space. While Rey sorted through the questionable jury-rigged electrical connections of the hyperdrive motivator, he checked the hypermatter and gamma radiation inputs in the hyperdrive field guide.

When a series of beeps from the astromech above them revealed the damage to the hyperdrive, Ben cursed under his breath. The issue was several faulty sensors that relayed data from the main computer. The only problem was there were thousands of sensors. Rey ejected the sensor tray from the panel and he cursed again. There was a family of those…Porg creatures from the island using the tray as a nest. She glared at him with a clear "I told you so" expression. He moved to grab one of the pests, but she swatted his hand away. With a twitch of her fingers—and a glare in his direction—she levitated the feathered creatures to safety above them. Blue chirped at them in greeting.

Rey began carefully plucking feathers and nesting material from around the sensors. Then she sat down on the floor as she began testing each sensor individually with a supra-electrometer. He pulled a duplicate tool from the toolbag at her hip, then slid down to the floor next to her, beginning on the other side of the tray. They worked in companionable silence until Rey said quietly, almost too soft to hear, “Where else have you been?”

She sounded almost…pained. The separation had clearly been difficult for both of them, but he wondered where she believed he had gone or done in her absence. “I went to Ahch-To,”
With her attention still focused on the task, she asked, “Did you find what you needed there?”

The inhabitants of the island didn’t care too much for him. The screeching creatures were constantly in the way. The cave offered him nothing of value. Even after he found the objects Luke had left behind, it had all felt…off. He wanted Rey there to explain where she had been standing in the rain or which hut Luke destroyed when they had touched hands. It felt wrong to be there without her, so he swore to himself he would bring her back one day. “I did,” he said finally. “It was strange being there without you.”

Rey looked up from her work to grace him with a half-smile. “Why did you come here?”

Ben shrugged. “For the Sarlacc pit.”

“There are Sarlaccs all over the galaxy,” she reminded him. “Why here?” She knew him better than he knew himself. In the beginning, Dameron asked him where he believed the Carbonite slab would be safest for the next few millennia. For some reason, his grandfather’s story in his dream about the Sarlacc was what popped up in his mind first. Dameron decided soon after that Ben should be the one to take him. But Rey was right; he didn’t need to go to Tatooine for a Sarlacc. He wanted to.

“I thought I’d find answers here.”

Rey released the sensors and tool as her stare found his again. “Did you?”

He had. Not the ones he had intended, but he had found answers, nonetheless. “Yes.”

“You seem different,” she said, “a good different.”

“So do you, Rey.” He couldn’t put his finger on what, but there was something different about her. While she still had her scars and likely would carry them for as long as he carried his own, she seemed like she had found her peace as well. There was a carefree contentment in her energy that he had never sensed before; the war within her had settled as much as the war around her had. She wasn’t concerned with the past or the future, and there was an easiness between them that had never been there before.
“Plutt is dead,” she offered. Ben had wondered, after he had learned of her visit to Jakku, whether she had confronted the monsters there. She had looked so…at peace that he hadn’t wanted to drudge up pain from the past. Now that she had found him, they had all the time in the world to talk about it, but he was grateful she wanted to share it with him. Part of him still felt guilty for not being there with her.

“Good,” he said carefully. “Did you kill him?”

“No. I didn’t kill any of them, even though they deserved it. There’s been enough death.” There was something in the way she said it—he knew she had seen the men who had attacked her and chosen to spare them. He would have loved her no matter which decision she had made, but he was grateful that she was content with what she had chosen. The past wasn’t all dead, but it didn’t control them anymore.

Ben busied himself with checking several of the sensors before he whispered, “I’m proud of you for being strong enough to let the past go.”

“Not all of it.” He looked up when he noticed her hands had stilled. She was staring at him, smiling with her eyes bright as sunshine. “I didn’t let you go.” Ben felt that tension again, drawing him to her. It had only escalated after the kiss they shared, and being in a confined space with her and not touching her was tormenting. His hand raised of its own volition, fingers sifting through the ends of her hair. Their stares followed his fingers, but she didn’t pull away. When he glanced up again, she had moved closer, and his heart skipped a beat.

Ben swore this was a dream he would wake from any moment. Kissing her had been the closest to the tranquility of the Cosmic Force he had ever felt, but he still feared it. Not as he did before, but he did fear the darkness that found him in his overwhelming passion for her. He feared losing his control. But as she leaned closer, he knew he wasn’t strong enough to stop himself, because nothing in the galaxy felt as right as demonstrating his love for her. The tension between them was broken, however, when her supra-electrometer beeped in her hand. “Oh, I found the circuit of bad sensors,” she gasped as she pulled away.

He huffed and lifted his hands away from the tray, his large fingers more of a hindrance anyway. Her hands were quick with experience as she repaired each sensor. On the last sensor, as she reconnected the final wire, she let out a yelp as a white arc of electricity shocked her. He reached for her instinctively, but she silenced him with her best attempt at a withering stare. Ben couldn’t help it, he pressed his lips together to suppress a smile. Rey was strong, fierce, and independent; she didn’t need anyone, which made it even better that she wanted him. After studying him for a moment—likely in an attempt to determine where his thoughts had wandered—she stood to replace the tray in the panel. “Blue, check to see if the hyperdrive is online,” she called to the droid. The astromech beeped in the negative and she frowned. “It should have worked; I know I fixed them all!”
“Let me,” he said as he stood, and she moved aside obligingly with a dramatic flourish. Leaning against the controls, and without breaking eye contact, he curled his hand into a fist and slammed it into the panel, a few centimeters above the sensor tray. Twice. Rey stared at him with her brows furrowed until Blue announced that the hyperdrive was online. He couldn’t suppress the wry smile that grew as her eyes widened in shock.

“How did you….”

He shrugged. “You might know all there is to know about a YT 1300f freighter, but I know my father’s ship.” He stretched his arms over his head and smiled victoriously. Her retaliation was to paralyze him in place with the Force. Ben had nowhere else to be, so—to her probable annoyance—he didn’t fight against it.

The silhouette of Blue appeared above him, his beeps echoing down into the compartment. “Okay. Meet them at Luke’s place. Make sure Dev isn’t contacting the Wilds with the holoprojector.” With an affirmative beep, Blue raced off to find the droid he claimed was the “most irritating droid in the galaxy.”

Completely at Rey’s mercy, Ben shifted his attention back to her. “Now that she’s fixed, where in the Outer Rim do you want to go?”

“I just want to see the galaxy,” she told him, stepping closer with that look in her eyes from the elevator. His pulse quickened as he realized he could do nothing but watch. When she stared at him like that, he could deny her nothing. “We can go wherever you want to go, as long as we make it back to Finn and Rose’s wedding.”

There would be one thing he would have to deny her. “Rey, I’m in exile, remember?”

“I had a dream, and it gave me an idea.” Rey stepped closer still. He tried to listen, he truly did, but the vulnerable position he was in made him hyper aware of her every movement. “They’ll make it a masquerade, and it will be the same location as your annual parole with the council. It’s on Hanna, the interim capitol for the Republic Systems Alliance. Maybe after your hearing, you could go to the wedding. I’m sure Poe could arrange it. He owes me for lying.” There was something that felt vaguely like deja vu. Had they told him before they would get married there? Had she? It felt like a memory he couldn’t quite remember. Or a dream.

“They’re having their wedding in Hanna City? On Chandrila?”
Rey’s brow pinched in confusion. “Was it the interim capitol after the fall of the Empire?”

“Yes, remember when I told you I was born the day the Galactic Concordance was signed? That was Hanna City.” Rey stared at him as if she didn’t quite believe him, or she didn’t remember. Then her eyes grew distant, and it looked as if she was staring through him, as if she was searching her own thoughts for an answer to something significant. Had she forgotten? Ben knew she had been there. “Remember where I told you to meet me in our dreams? Lake Andrasha? It’s there.”

Whatever it was she was searching for, she’d found it. He saw the flash of recognition in her eyes. “That’s quite a coincidence.” There was something knowing in her stare, something in her tone that told him it wasn’t a coincidence at all. In her distraction, she had released him from her hold. Because he hadn’t been fighting against it, he wasn’t prepared to support his weight and slid down to the floor.

Ben huffed a slight chuckle. “What are the odds?” He knew coincidences weren’t coincidences in his life. There was something in the energy around them that told him it had been fated long before the council had chosen that place for his hearing. Had it been destiny? Were they always meant to be together on Chandrila? Or had Rey set it all in motion somehow? It didn’t terrify him as it once would have. After everything they had been through, what was one more mystery of the Force? Whether it was influenced by cosmic or mortal hands, they were together; that was all that mattered.

Rey slid down to the floor next to him. The hope in her eyes had returned. Ben knew she was waiting for an answer. “All right, in six months, we’ll go to Chandrila, together,” he promised. She squealed and wrapped her arms around his neck. He closed his eyes, sighing with contentment. They were talking about the future—their future—a future he never had imagined was possible for a man like him, a future he wasn’t certain he deserved. “Anywhere else you want to go?”

“We’ll figure it all out as we go,” she whispered as she slid her hand into his. Staring up at him, she had more hope in her eyes than he had ever seen in her. For once, he didn’t feel the sickening dread that he would destroy it. For once, he believed that they would figure it out. Because for once, he had hope.

Ben huffed softly as he stared down at their joined hands. “Well, I can guarantee it won’t be nearly as exciting as this last year.”

“I think I’m okay with that,” she laughed, squeezing him gently. “Although I’m not sure there could ever be a dull moment with you.”
“Well,” he said, staring up the ladder at the interior of the *Falcon*, “what do you want to do first?” His chuckle resonated through his chest. He couldn’t help it, he just felt so…happy.

Rey lifted herself onto her heels so he would meet her stare. “Show me the galaxy, Ben.” He would have, that very moment, if she hadn’t cupped his face. Her thumb grazed his lip, and her attention was drawn there. When she brushed her thumb over his lip again, it was with intention. He released a sharp inhale as he noticed that she had shifted closer. There was no time for the fear to bloom in his chest again—or enough brainpower to spare, for that matter—when his eyes met hers and his thoughts stuttered to a halt at the desire darkening in them.

The golden flecks in her irises were on fire, and he was perfectly content allowing the raging inferno that sparked at her touch to consume him. Molten heat spread through his body at an unnerving pace, but her eyes tethered him to the moment, not allowing his mind to wander, forcing him to allow himself to feel. During their time apart, he had learned to allow himself to feel emotionally; now she was giving him a crash course on how to allow himself to feel physically. He should have been terrified faced with the sudden vulnerability, but all he could think was *more*.

Her lips hovered achingly close to his; he could feel their breath mixing in the air between them. He could already feel the darkness fighting for control over his desire, his entire body thrumming with anticipation. The idea of kissing had never interested him, but it did with Rey.

Ben was leaning against the control panel with his legs stretched out in front of him, attempting to will away the very noticeable evidence of his arousal. He couldn’t remember the last time he had dealt with such weakness... *no, not a weakness.* His inner argument was immediately broken when she managed to straddle his thighs—*when did that happen?*—lighting off a thousand different reactions in his brain. Ben bit back a groan as he tried to not let his thoughts wander to their position and its implications. If his brain had been a circuit board, it would have been fried beyond repair.

She closed the distance between them, her hands on his face anchoring him, shutting the rest of the galaxy out. The tension in the Force around them dragged them together, and suddenly the warmth and softness of her lips enveloped his. Her lips moved with desperation; her hands slid up to entangle in his hair and pull. He felt desire—of course—but he also felt... loved. No one had ever touched him like this, and that she wanted to touch him left him content in a way he had never been. This was Rey... his Rey, and every touch showed him that he was hers.

His breathing was already ragged when she parted her lips in invitation. He surrendered to his desire and allowed himself to taste her. Just for a moment. The heat of her mouth was transcendent, and the passionate slide of her tongue enslaving. She groaned into his mouth, and his hands squeezed her hips in response. He didn’t know what purpose he held in the Cosmic Force, but he
was positive in that moment that he was the luckiest man in the galaxy to be *wanted* by her.

She slid into his lap, and he shut his eyes, throwing his head back as he realized that he had never felt anything as physically pleasurable in his life. The loud thud his head made when it connected with the control panel echoed through the compartment. They broke apart to giggle dizzily. Rey smiled against his lips as she soothed the contusion on his head with her gentle fingers. He was confident that he would have a concussion later from the force of his head hitting the wall of hyperdrive components, but he didn’t have enough blood flowing to his brain to tell whether the dizziness was from hitting his head or because he hadn’t figured out how to breathe with his mouth so thoroughly occupied.

She shifted again in his lap, her eyes wide as she realized what was pressed hard against her center. Before he could panic, he felt the warmth of her core through his trouser leg. With that sensation, he lost the ability to do simple things, like remember his name. Granted, he had never put much thought into what this would feel like, but he never expected it to feel like *that*. It took everything in him not to tighten his already vice-like grip on her hips and rock her heat against his growing arousal until he felt that other-worldly pleasure again. He decided he had never wanted anything in his darkness as profoundly as he wanted to touch her in that moment. He craved to explore her body, feel her warmth on his bare skin, make her feel like he did from a single touch.

The growl that rumbled in his throat was obscene, but then, so was his instinctual thrust as she pressed down against his swollen length. He froze as he realized what he had done, fearing that he was losing his carefully developed control as years of subjugation of his physical desires disintegrated under her touch. Rey swallowed his apology, fingers twisting in his hair with a building urgency, her hips moving on intuition to create more friction where they needed it most.

The energy of the Force between them intensified, pulsing through him as it sharpened the pleasure building from the grinding heat between them. It was most definitely building; the stimulation caused a tightening pressure in his groin that made Ben reach into the Force to control it. He may have been naïve when it came to physical intimacy, but he knew enough to fear *that* happening. He had always understood it to be a weakness to give in to one’s baser desires, but there were no voices in his head speaking of shame or other vulgarities anymore. Ben would examine whether he could eventually allow that of himself, but he knew enough to know that now was not the time for losing control. It required him to pull more strength from the Force, but the pressure subsided.

The Force was also helpful in reassuring him that, although he had no clue what to do with his body, she was also enjoying whatever it was that they were doing. It wasn’t sex—there was too much material between them for that—but *Force* if it didn’t feel like the act that men had destroyed galaxies for. Connected to her like this, he could feel the fire burning in her core through the Force, and he couldn’t help but preen with the knowledge that it was all for him…all because of him.
Rey pulled her lips away to breathe, and he found himself latching onto the soft skin of her neck. It wasn’t something he had even considered, he just moved as if he knew exactly what she needed, trailing passionate open-mouth kisses and nips down to her collarbone. Her groan from his attention tore another feral growl from his throat, his jaw hardening as his control slipped. He bit down on her shoulder as he forced back the need for release, and the resulting moan that left her lips shot straight through his aching arousal.

At some point, he realized his own hips had begun to thrust to match the rolling of hers. The friction was tormenting, both too much and not enough. The realization made him feel too heated, the material of his grey tunic irritating and oppressive against his sweat-saturated skin. His fingers itched to lay her back and remove the barriers between them. He wanted every last article of clothing to disappear so there was nothing but skin on skin. He wanted to touch her soft skin and see her—and if that thought didn’t nearly kill him—his desire blended with hers, coalescing and escalating in the Force around them. Ben almost lost himself in everything that was her. Then she grasped his hands in hers, interlocking their fingers as she slid their hands under her tunic and up over her bare skin.

All the apparent blood loss he was suffering wasn’t enough to hide the sudden clarity that flooded through him when his fingers grazed soft mounds where he expected to find a band. He jolted in surprise, his lips separating from her neck as he gasped in a shuddering breath.

“Rey…”

Ben’s hands stilled on their torturously slow ascent up her sensitive abdomen, just as his fingers grazed the underside of her breasts. His attention on her neck stopped. Tearing his hands away, he wrapped his arms around her tightly, forcing the rocking of her hips to stall. His entire body shook as he pressed his forehead to hers.

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“Ben?”

“We have to… we have to stop,” he choked out. She was concerned for a moment that he didn’t
want her, that her body was not what he desired, but that fear subsided quickly as she felt his emotions in the Force. He was panicking, but it wasn’t focused on her or her shortcomings. His heart pounded against hers in fear as he focused intently on maintaining his death-grip on the Force to stall the release building inside him. He wanted her; she could feel his desire. His entire body was tense. She wanted him, she wanted everything he was willing to give to her, but she wanted him to be present enough to enjoy it. Ben had allowed her to lead, to set the pace; she could help him relax in return.

Rey pulled out of his embrace, cupping his face so he would look at her. His lips were swollen, his hair falling haphazardly across his forehead, his pupils wide and dark and unfocused. He was falling apart, but she couldn’t help finding him breathtakingly beautiful. “It’s okay, Ben. Let go. I’ll help you.” He parted his lips to protest, but she silenced him with a soft, tender kiss. It was odd that something so gentle could feel just as spine-tingling as the desperate hunger that had been surging through her body only moments before.

“I’ll help you,” she repeated, “trust me.” Rey punctuated her assertion by sliding her sensitive center over his swollen length that was still frustratingly contained in his trousers. She didn’t know exactly what was happening to her body, but the friction was driving her wild as she continued to chase the pleasure her body and the Force were guiding her to reach. He groaned as she increased the pressure in her grinding against him, each desperate noise he made was like a spark to the fire low in her belly. “Please,” she breathed against his lips, and he nodded, his hands returning to her hips to guide her over his blissfully hard shaft.

Rey could feel the exact instant the fear faded as he lost himself in the heady feeling. Rey dropped one hand from his face, quickly untying the laces of his trousers with the Force. She knew that if she could just bare him to her, then he would let her help him. Keeping her mouth locked onto his, she lifted up—her core tightening from the loss of his warmth against her—and she slipped her hand underneath the waistline of his trousers. Her fingers wrapped around the soft, heated skin of his length and both gasped as pleasure shuddered through them. That was new.

Can I feel....

Experimentally, she released him and grasped him again, harder. The coiling heat shot straight through her core, and she could feel something tightening with rapture in her abdomen. He threw his head back again, this time thankfully missing the control panel. His eyes were screwed shut, his breath heavy and wanton in the small compartment. She squeezed his shaft again, and this time he instinctually thrust into her hand. Rey covered her mouth as the pleasure overwhelmed her. Her physical connection to him acted as the bond had in the Force; she could feel what he felt.

Her eyes shifted down to his lap, surprised by the power she felt grasping his heavy warmth in her hands. It was as much of a contradiction as he was; both hard and soft, proportionate and larger than she had expected. His eyes were pure fire as he stared at her, mouth agape, the rigidity in his
muscles falling away as he relinquished control to her.

As he began rocking his hips up into her hand, she shifted to straddle his left leg, finding her own relief by grinding shamelessly against his thigh. She tilted her hips forward, focusing her attention on her incredibly sensitive center. Ben seemed to understand her needs, flexing his quad muscles and lifting his leg slightly to reduce her to a whimpering mess—not that he was much better off.

He uttered a low curse, his fingers bruising on her hips, his length twitching and throbbing in her fingers. More heat was coiling tightly in her core, and her body reacted by releasing obscene amounts of arousal that drenched her trousers. Their pleasure became an overwhelming feedback loop of building ecstasy, and Rey could feel the threshold that they were both approaching. It was comforting that, if she tumbled over the edge, then she would drag him with her.

Ben must have understood that as she did. His head snapped up, his eyes full of fear before he clenched them shut. He tensed as he stilled his thrusts, the Force drawn toward him like a vacuum to suspend his release. Rey didn’t know why he refused to allow himself something purely euphoric, but she was beginning to suspect that the issue lay much deeper than wanting to prolong their tryst.

Rey began rolling her hips again, using his thigh to move the inferno of her own pleasure, but also to ignite the embers of his. Then she began moving her hand up and down his length, simulating the rocking of his hips. She was unsure of herself at first. His brows were furrowed, and he almost looked...pained. His reaction, however, both physically and in the Force was visceral. There was no doubt he very much enjoyed the way she touched him.

“Ben, look at me.” His eyes fluttered open at her command. They were hazed over with lust, but she still felt the fear in the Force.

He shook his head. “Rey, I can’t....”

“Don’t be afraid,” she said with far more confidence than she felt, staring up at him coyly through her lashes. “I feel it too.”

Ben didn’t crack a smile or relax as she had hoped, but he didn’t ask her to stop, either. She would not be discouraged; he had come so far already. If he refused to help himself, then she could help him. Rey squeezed him tightly, sliding her hand up and down his length. Grinding against him, she simultaneously chased her own pleasure. His eyes were locked on hers as his panting became soft moans. The tension coiling inside her mounted rapidly, the crest impending again. His intense eyes bored into hers as her whimpers grew louder. She could feel him holding on still, his entire body
shaking as control slipped through his grasp. She curled her left hand into his hair, trembling as she slid against his hardened arousal, pulling him close enough to whisper in his ear, “Let go, Ben.”

She felt the snap of the Force as he released it, the pleasure escalating exponentially without its restraint. Her thighs quivered in anticipation. His teeth bit his lip raw as he watched her. Now that they were approaching that unknown threshold, Rey felt a tingle of fear shiver down her spine. Ben’s fear died away the instant he sensed hers. Releasing his desperate hold on her hips, he tilted her chin with his finger and captured her lips in a promise of safety and devotion. She fell apart into their kiss, and it was only a few more strokes against his heated skin before the taut coil inside him snapped as well.

A jolting current sparked from the base of her spine straight down to her toes and up again, waves of euphoria hijacking her command over basic functions. She collapsed forward onto him as she lost control of her ability to sit upright. He supported her against him even as his own body spasmed through release. Her entire body curled in as she shuddered, the Force thrumming through her as her cries coalesced with his, echoing through the compartment. She felt him jerking in her hand, pulsing with her heartbeat. She opened her eyes to see his thick, opaque spend painting streaks on his shirt.

Rey could feel the heat of his stare, and she glanced up at him briefly, smiling in reassurance before returning to the sticky liquid staining his clothes. Neither moved, the only sound in the small compartment their ragged breaths. Curious, as she came down from her high, she swiped two fingers through the warmth of his release. She studied it with rapt interest, stretching it between her fingers. Without hesitation, she flicked her tongue over it to taste him.

Ben watched her, mouth agape, before groaning and collapsing back against the wall. “You do want to kill me.”

That was…. There were no words in Basic or otherwise that described it. Pure bliss, he supposed. It
was the closest he had ever felt to compare to those last few moments before death that were nothing but warm, euphoric peace. Ben closed his eyes, centering himself as he tried in vain to return his breathing to normal.

For as long as he could remember, the idea of finding physical release with either oneself or another was viewed as improper…vulgar…shameful…debased. Both Jedi teachings and Sidious had made it clear that any thoughts revolving around physical intimacy were a weakness. Any interest he’d had as a child were snuffed out quickly. Sidious’s training and revolting touch only served to make the idea of sharing his body with anyone as terrifying as sharing his heart, to the point he had covered every last centimeter of his skin.

Luke and Sidious had turned his body into a weapon, and he never had any desire to think about it since. At least, not until Rey. He thought he was broken, he thought he would never feel anything but hatred ever again. Her love for him made him want to change, and his love for her made it happen. Love was one thing. Allowing himself to experience this—to enjoy it—had been something he never thought would happen, especially not when she had been broken too.

He knew from her memories that she had likewise never had any interest in physical intimacy. There was a different type of creature that had altered the significance of her particular physical needs—starvation. Her body had become a tool, her survival outweighed any unnecessary desires. In her world, pleasure was a luxury or a profession, and though she was knowledgeable of it, nothing could make the act of what others had attempted to take from her worth exploring.

Ben had presumed they were both broken in that way, molded by circumstance to never require the exploration of their carnal needs. Being around her, however, had awakened desires in him that he had never thought possible. When she kissed him, his body reacted in ways it never had before. Losing his carefully crafted control around her was nothing new, but to respond so viscerally to the heat of her tongue in his mouth…well, there it started again.

As if he had not just experienced a life-changing release, one thought of her tongue and he grew achingly aroused again. He realized he was drawing energy from the Force, the baser part of his brain was clear with its intentions—*more*.

She stared at him as if she wanted him, still. After everything, she still wanted to kiss him, to touch him, to pleasure herself on him, and he couldn’t understand it. Nor could he understand why she had wanted him to find release, but she hadn’t given up on him. He’d had felt like he was standing on one side of a mirror, convinced he couldn’t pass through, but she had taken his hand and helped him through to the other side. He had finally allowed himself that pleasure, the proof of it was smeared into his shirt, and she didn’t find him disgusting or undesirable. He sensed no regret or fear of him in the Force. Her climax was the most beautiful thing he had ever witnessed, and her face was soft with contentment.
Rey studied him carefully, as if she needed to worry about what he was thinking, as if his body hadn’t made it clear enough. Her eyes widened when they drifted back down his body. She was watching him grow with interest, and, Force, did that threaten to ruin him. Ben felt even more exposed than he had that night early in their bond when she had caught him half-dressed after training. His heart had been in his throat for the entirety of that connection—laid bare both physically and emotionally—he had been all sharp words and false bravado then, only her physical reaction to him soothing the sting of her words. He felt much the same now, exposed, though he felt the throbbing of his heart decidedly lower. That feigned confidence was gone, but she still gave him the courage to bare himself again to her in every way a man could. For reasons he couldn’t explain, she had wanted him and somehow still wanted him.

“Stop overthinking this, Ben,” she whispered, her eyes never straying from his lap. His length was fully erect again, and she stared at him with eyes that looked...hungry.

Ben was never blessed with forming the right words around her, and, at the moment, he was incapable of forming any words at all. He knew he overthought everything—truly he did—but he didn’t know how to turn off the thoughts bouncing around in his mind. His thoughts had taken a decidedly carnal turn, his primal brain very focused on the way she was licking her lips...and he was powerless to stop it. A drop of arousal beaded at the tip of his straining length, and she looked up at him in silent question. He uttered every curse he knew in every language he had ever learned.

*Force, she does. She wants to kill me.*

He swallowed thickly. His hands clenched and unclenched at his side in an overwhelming anticipation as her head moved closer. If he had been lost to her mercy by her hand, if the warmth of her mouth on his had stolen his very breath, then what would her mouth *there* do to him. He didn’t have to wait long to find out. The tip of her tongue slid across the slit in the throbbing head of his shaft, collecting the drop of arousal there. It was a brief, tender touch, but his body jerked as if she had set off countermeasure flares inside him. He wanted to ask why—they had already achieved release—but he bit back a moan instead.

He was naïve to everything but the basic mechanics of sex; still, he was rather positive the climax was the point. His thoughts were interrupted by the feel of the flat of her tongue trailing up his aching length. Everything tightened involuntarily, and, for a split-second, he believed he would climax again from that one touch. She repeated the slow slide of her tongue over his bared skin, tasting him. Hyperventilating, he crumpled back against the control panel before he did something foolish like pass out.

Each stroke of her tongue was like lightning strikes of ecstasy, leaving him wondering if there was
such a thing as too much pleasure. Then she wrapped her mouth around the tip, and he was
thoroughly convinced that yes, there is, and he was resolved that he would die by the warmth of
her mouth. She must have sensed how that felt, because she made a few more experimental open
mouth kisses around the swollen head, and he lost himself so thoroughly in the feeling that his
body impulsively thrust deeper into her mouth. Yes. He threw his head back and groaned loudly in
the small space.

Rey had always been one to learn quickly, and she continued to take him deeper into her throat.
Ben didn’t know what to do with himself as the shattering pleasure returned. His hands were still
clenching and unclenching as he leaned forward and then back again, his fists covering his eyes
and then hovering at his side. He was completely at the mercy of her mouth. Rey seemed to
understand the power she held over him as he panted heatedly. Her eyes found his as she sucked
harder with enthusiasm. She smiled around his shaft as she stared up at him, releasing him with a
kiss to the tip that was far too chaste for the obscene acts she had just been doing with those lips.

“I think I found a way to turn off your thoughts,” Rey breathed on his heated skin, her lips
glistening as she grinned up at him. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her into another
kiss, the cool air doing nothing to temper his throbbing desire. Rey broke the kiss to slide back
down his body.

“You don’t have to—”

“I know,” she said, licking her lips. “I want to do this, Ben.” She took him entirely into her mouth,
drawing on the energy around them for Force-knows-what. Her cheeks visibly hollowed as her
mouth slid back up to the tip, and Ben was not responsible for the nonsensical blabbering or
convulsive movements she pulled from him. Her eyes watered as she looked up at him, and he
couldn’t understand why she wanted this. Granted, she could likely feel his pleasure through the
Force as she had before, but, whatever her reason was, it made the whole situation more erotic that
she wanted to do it.

For his part, he couldn’t decide whether he wanted to watch her—and likely die—or tilt his head
back and lose himself completely to the feeling. He settled for an odd combination of both, which
probably resembled someone in the throes of death more than the throes of ultimate pleasure—or
perhaps the two acts were far more similar than he had ever thought. Yes, that.

Ben was surprised that the tightening feeling he had fought before hadn’t returned. He presumed it
had something to do with the previous climax. Could it happen again? He had no idea. Thoughts of
release brought his mind back to her and her release and she should feel this good too. She was too
far for him to touch the way he wanted, but even if she was closer, he wasn’t certain he should.

He hadn’t yet touched her, and, as much as he had a million different things he wanted to try, he
wasn’t certain *she* wanted him to. He would be entirely content to maintain the status quo, but he wanted her to enjoy this as deeply as he did.

His brain warned him it was impossible for him to form words while her mouth pulled primal noises from his throat, but he drew on the Force to give him enough strength to speak. “Can I…can I touch you?” he asked between ragged breaths.

Rey nodded without so much as slowing in her slide down his length. He gathered more of the Force and manipulated it with what little control he had left. He found the wet warmth at the apex of her thighs. She must have not considered *where* he wanted to touch her, because she yelped when he applied pressure to the sensitive area she had been rubbing against his thigh. By the way she moaned around him as he continued—Force help him—it must not have been a bad yelp.

Ben watched her intently now, her whimpers vibrating down his length and *through* him quickly causing that tightening to build again. An increase in the pressure at her responsive center had been an accident as he rocked the energy against her, but she scraped her teeth against his heated skin, and the sharp spike of pleasure mixed with pain made his eyes roll back in his head.

Rey seemed to enjoy the rougher, more erratic press of energy, however, and soon he was quickening the rolling of the Force to match the urgency of their panted breaths. The pressure was increasing, and he may not have been experienced with climaxes, but he knew enough to know it was imminent. He refused, however, to allow himself that bliss without her. Though he liked to believe he was becoming a quick study with Rey, he had even less experience with pleasing others, which happened to be absolutely no experience before her. What he did have, however, was the command over the Force, and he would take that over experience any day.

Ben experimented with several different techniques and found that she reacted—quite enthusiastically—to the energy being manipulated to pulse and vibrate similarly to what her mouth was doing to him. The moans he elicited only added to the spike in pressure, and he knew they would be dragging each other over that peak again. He realized he probably shouldn’t find release in her mouth, so he did his best while writhing in ecstasy to remove himself from her warmth by grasping her arm and dragging her upward. The touch of her tongue over the sensitive tip as he pulled away was what sent him over the edge, dragging her along with him.

Everything in his body tightened in a crescendo until the pressure released. Long, thick spurts of fluid burst from him as he spasmed uncontrollably. Pleasure pulsed through his body, and, for the first few seconds, he couldn’t force his eyes to open. He braced himself on his arms to keep himself from collapsing backward. Opening his eyes, he watched as she clutched onto his still-wet shirt, her face buried in his shoulder, as she rode out her own climax. That moment of rapture felt as blissful as it had the first time.
Glancing down, he realized he had coated the front of her clothes in an impressive amount of fluid, considering she had already brought him to climax once. He had heard from others that back-to-back climaxes were unrealistic, but either his body never got that holo-memo, or the Force was good for one more benefit, or detriment, considering Rey likely didn’t appreciate him soiling her clothes. Coming down from the high, he sucked in uneven breaths, brushing the damp hair from her face to study her expression. He felt the light warming him when he noticed her smiling.

“You cheated,” she said when her breathing had leveled out. “You used the Force.” He laughed, and her eyes flickered open to watch him. He would have been a fool if he didn’t notice how she studied him when he laughed. Maybe he would have told her he noticed if it didn’t elicit a beaming smile in return. Ben closed his eyes just for a moment. He didn’t care if he was propped against the hyperdrive controls at an odd angle, or that both of them were covered in his sticky, drying release. He was exhausted, and she was warm against him. There was no place he would rather be.

Rey didn’t know when she had fallen asleep, or how long she had been, but she awoke feeling warm and safe in Ben’s strong arms. She couldn’t remember ever feeling so happy upon awakening. At first, she feared it was a dream. With her dream in the Force, her awakening after she saved him, the dreams after she thought he was dead…it was difficult to remember what was reality in those first few moments after sleep. Some part of her still believed she would awake in an abandoned AT-AT on Jakku, but the Force guided her to the truth. *This* was real. Rey smiled.

She lifted herself up, studying his peaceful expression as he slept. His hair—which had already when tousled by their activities, swept across his forehead. His long eyelashes kissed his rosy cheeks that were spattered with moles that she could draw from memory. She thought she just might try to draw him in an attempt to find an outlet for the warmth bubbling up inside her.

Ben was there, with her, and no amount of physical pleasure could make her feel better than that. Raising fingers to his lips, she waited to feel the warm puff of his breath. Satisfied that all was right with the galaxy, she attempted to untangle herself from his arms. Their clothes stuck together where his fluid had bound them. She gently pulled the material apart, deciding there was no sense in wearing the soiled clothes any longer.

Rey freed herself from her tunic, balling it up and tossing it to the other corner of the compartment. Her hands moved to her trousers, and she convinced herself it was for comfort. When she was left bare, she could feel the left-over effect of their tryst between her thighs. When she had awoken alone in the large bunk that morning, she had skipped undergarments in her rush to find him. She was grateful now that she did. Despite what they had done together, he had never seen her like this.
The thought of him waking up and discovering her as the Force intended was thrilling.

She stared down at his reposed form, deciding he was wearing entirely too many clothes. It only seemed natural then that she should make it more even. Rationalizing that his shirt was a mess and he enjoyed sleeping bare-chested, she decided to remove it for him. Straddling his waist, for better access, she was disappointed that she couldn’t feel the heated solidity of him against her center as she had before. Just the thought of it elicited an instant pooling of heat again, and she couldn’t help the desire to softly roll her hips as she longed for that friction again.

Rey found the clasps on his shirt and began opening them one by one with deft fingers. She had only made it through four or five clasps before his hand shot up and gripped her waist tightly, his eyes snapping open. “Ben…” she froze, her desires abandoned in concern that she had done something wrong. Those fears subsided as he moaned. He blinked once, twice, his pupils constricting as he focused on her face. “Love? Are you awake?” she asked.

A smile brightened his face, his fingers curling into his grip around her waist. “Love?”

It wasn’t the first thing she thought he’d address, but Ben was nothing if not unpredictable. “Yeah, you call me ‘sweetheart,’ so I don’t know, it just felt—”

“No, I like—” Ben did not finish his assertion. His eyes had released hers from captivity long enough to glance down her face to her lips and neck…and then widened when they reached her bare shoulders. Now his stare was unmistakably lower, eyes dark as they traveled her chest. “I like….” He tried again, but he swallowed his words as his gaze dropped down the expanse of her abdomen to her ready and waiting center. His breathing picked up incrementally, his hands clenched in trembling fists as his eyes devoured her. “Force, Rey, I…."

“Like?”

The renewed fire in his eyes emboldened her. He barely managed a nod, his jaw agape as she boldly slid her hands up his shirt. His soul-baring eyes gave her all the confidence she needed, the heat behind his stare returning as she released each clasp of his shirt. Other than the uneven rise and fall of his chest, he remained motionless, as if he feared any movement would discourage her. When she had it undone, she gripped each side of the open shirt. He moved into a sitting position so she could slide it off his incredibly broad shoulders. He shifted each shoulder to assist her, his penetrating stare never leaving hers as she slid her hands over his bare chest appreciatively. She smoothed her hand over the hard plains of muscle, her fingertips lightly trailing down the ridges of scar tissue in the descent down his abdomen.
Before their nap, her mouth had been wrapped around his manhood, yet somehow touching him like this felt far more intimate. The fervency had died away, leaving behind trembling fingers, uncertain glances, and stuttered breaths. She leaned back to admire the expanse of well-defined muscles. He had the body of a warrior.

“Mine.”

Rey didn’t know where the sentiment had come from, nor had she meant to say it aloud. An apology was on the tip of her tongue, but all at once his hands were cupping her face, his lips descending upon hers with shuddering devotion. Immediately, she could feel the heat of his growing arousal as she straddled him, the sensation collecting a familiar coiling heat low in her groin.

Though, it was difficult to focus on her growing desire when there was something stronger in the Force around them, something more than passion in his kiss. Love. She felt surrounded by his love. No denial or fear could overshadow the strength behind that emotion as he gave all he had to her. Ben Solo felt every emotion profoundly; of course love wouldn’t be any different, but she had never felt anything from him as penetrating as his love. Deepening the kiss, Rey wrapped her arms around his neck. Only then did she realize he was shaking under her touch, and not in a carnal way. When she pulled away, Ben hid his face in her neck.

She immediately felt wetness on the bare skin of her shoulder, and she attempted to pull away to confirm her suspicion. He pressed his face deeper into the safety of her embrace, shaking his head in earnest. Rey placed her hands on either side of his face and lifted his head to meet her searching gaze. His eyes were wet, but he didn’t hide his emotions from her. He worried his lip as he met her stare, and there was something…soft and hopeful in his pleading eyes. “Ben? What’s wrong?” This man had always been an enigma, but with only the material of his trousers between her heat and his still throbbing length paired with the tear tracks on his face, Rey was at a loss for what to do next.

“Say it again?”

“Say what again?” she asked softly, knowing his tells well enough to understand that this was a significant moment for him, but not understanding why.

He exhaled a shuddered breath, blinking back tears. “Tell me I’m yours.”

Rey smiled, tracing the scar that split his face. Has there ever been a time that you weren’t mine, even if you didn’t know it yet? Ben had been told he was loved enough in his life, but they had failed him by not showing him. She would spend the rest of her life proving to him that he was
loved and wanted, but she wanted to give him more than words in that moment. She wanted more than his words in return. She pushed herself up on her knees, bringing her lips to his ear.

“I’ll show you that you’re mine,” she whispered, dropping her hand between them, her fingers following the dark trail of hair down his lower abdomen. He shivered when her hands reached the waistline of his trousers. The laces were still undone, so she grasped each side of the waistband and began dragging them down his legs. Her focus was not on the expanse of skin she was revealing, but on his eyes. She searched for the first warning of disapproval, reading his emotions like an open holobook, but only love and ever-growing hunger remained.

Rey carefully slid off his boots, then the material of his trousers off each foot, finally leaving him as bare as she was. When she looked up, she took in his fully nude form for the first time. Every part of him was proportional to his impressive stature, from his pouty lips to his swollen shaft to the hand he held extended to her. She placed her hand in his, and he pulled her into his embrace. As she hovered over him, his hands moved to her hair as he removed her braid, strand by strand. It was far more sensual than it ought to be.

When he finished, she immediately ravaged his mouth with lips and tongue and teeth. One of his hands wrapped around hers as if their lives depended upon it. The other cupped her head to open her further to his heated attentions. Rey lowered herself to his lap, rolling her hips as she had done before. The slide of his exposed length against her slippery folds sent sparks tingling up her spine. Ben shouted something desperate and beseeching in her mouth, pulling away to gasp for breath. He wrapped his arms around her, trapping her against his chest—not enough to suspend her moan-inducing movements, but enough to feel enveloped by his warm skin. The friction between them had him panting in her hair, but she wanted more. Ben let her go when she pushed away from his embrace, but there was a question in his eyes. Lifting herself up, she grasped his straining warmth in her hand, sliding her fingers over his feverish skin that was still wet from her arousal. Ben watched her hand in rapture as she pumped him, until she moved her hips to align her center with his tip. Rey knew the basic mechanics—though she was skeptical that he would be able to fit that inside her—and, judging by the look of sudden panic in his eyes, so did he.

“Rey, what are you—”

“I want you,” she murmured. “Do you want me?” He visibly swallowed, staring at her as if he thought she would change her mind. She hesitated over his throbbing shaft, waiting for a reply. She knew Ben well enough to know that a thousand thoughts were churning behind those intelligent eyes, forming an argument to talk himself out of allowing this beautiful physical bond. “Ben?”

His voice trembled when he spoke. “You want to do this…with me?” In answer, she lowered herself so that his tip was pressed against her opening. She stared up at him with raised brows,
reminding him that she had made her choice; she wanted him. If he chose not to give himself to her, it would be his choice, not a misguided effort to make her choice for her. The tip of his heated length twitched against her, pressing him the tiniest bit further into her enveloping warmth. She gasped, and he bit back a moan. It took everything in her not to give in to her desires and chase that pleasure. The touch of warmth seemed to have the same effect on him, and he clenched his fists in an attempt to restrain himself.

“Do you want me?” she repeated.

Closing his eyes, he dropped his head to press his forehead against hers and she instinctively sent him soothing waves of light. “I want you, Force, do I want you. But I don’t want to hurt you—” His fears were cut off by a gasp as she sank down on his waiting shaft. She cried out at the intrusion, feeling as if he just might tear her apart. She clenched around him greedily, and she wanted more, she wanted to take all of him. He was just so big.

“Rey….,” he rasped.

Rocking her hips from side to side, she tried to take more of him. It seemed impossible; she had never felt so full of anything in her entire life. It was an incredible sensation. Closing her eyes, she found the Force in an attempt to center herself. The Force. In what was, in all likelihood, a complete misuse of the Force, Rey absorbed the light from around her to help her body relax and stretch to accommodate his length. Lowing herself slowly, her insides gripped him tightly as he filled her. Centimeter by heated centimeter, she took him deeper, until they were flush together.

Rey couldn’t see his expression, but the broken groan that passed through his lips when she finally moved was better than words. There seemed to be no room for him, and yet she was able to slide her inner walls with ease over his length. She found a rhythm matching the rolling of her hips with the upward thrusts of his, building an instant spine-tingling friction between them. His entire body was shaking, every breath uneven, the ends of his hair tickling her face as he pressed his forehead to hers. She could feel the fire igniting into an inferno as his tip rubbed against something inside her that sparked in pleasure with every stroke.

Ben tilted his head to kiss her again, and this time she wasn’t surprised to feel the wet streaks underneath her thumb as she caressed his cheek. The pleasure was overwhelming in the connection between their bodies, but the feeling of the connection between their souls was life-altering. Rey could feel him in every part of her until there was nothing that separated them anymore. She could feel everything he felt. As she lost herself in their private little world, she could almost pretend their bond still existed. She didn’t know if it was because she had accessed the Force, or if it was the act itself, but she could feel the light flowing between them from where they were connected. It was the closest she had ever felt to the dream she’d had of existing in the Cosmic Force. All she could feel was love and peace and euphoria.
Rey broke their kiss to stare up at him. She knew he could feel it all, she knew he shared the fire that roared inside her, and she wanted to see his eyes, to bear witness to the happiness she had helped him find. She knew what he felt, yet when she looked at him, his eyes were no different than when she had told him she would stay with him. There was desire, but it was overshadowed by love. “I love you,” he murmured softly, holding onto her as if his life depended upon it.

“I love you, too.” Rey blinked away the tears from her own eyes. The way he looked at her was as if she held the key to the Cosmic Force.

It was then that she realized that Ben’s hands would slide up her waist, but he would catch himself and return them to her hips. It was as if he feared to explore her even while he was fully sheathed inside her. She would have laughed if she wasn’t alternating between grinding down against her apex as he rubbed against a sensitive spot deep inside her. Pulling back in her lustful haze, she breathed on his lips, “You can touch me, Ben. Anywhere. Everywhere.”

Ben blinked in confusion as if she had spoken a foreign language. It seemed to finally sink in as his hands slid over her feverish skin. Tentatively, his palms slid up her abdomen, and the thought that one palm could span her entire belly made her shiver. When he reached her breasts, he was hesitant at first, or perhaps he was just busy staring. Sliding his hands over her tender mounds, he cupped them in awe.

“Beautiful,” he whispered so quietly, she wasn’t sure she was supposed to hear it. The way he stared at her made her feel like the only woman in the galaxy. The rough skin of his fingers traced over her nipples, dragging a whimper from her throat. He hissed through his teeth as each bud hardened under his touch. She could feel the instant a barrier fell inside him and darkness trickled into the Force around them.

Before she could blink, he had surged forward. Ben tilted her backward in an attempt to gain better access, his mouth hovering over her breast, her overly reactive skin pebbling from the heavy puffs of his breath. With his eyes focused on her soft swells, he gave a particularly deep thrust up into her to watch them bounce, before his warm tongue swirled around the hardening bud. The change in angle left him rubbing on a new, sensitive spot, and Rey cried out as she grasped desperately at his hair. In this position, she was entirely at his mercy as he pulled her down onto his length. The attention on her nipple was driving her wild, their combined pleasure in the Force dragging them closer to climax, but she wanted that jarring feeling of that particularly rough thrust again.

In her lust-filled delirium, she had no idea what to ask for, but she begged him all the same. “Please, Ben. More.”
Those three words unleashed a man unhinged in the most pleasurable way. His eyes darkened almost instantly, burning with an intensity she had first witnessed behind the clash of their blades on Starkiller. A sudden darkness surrounded them, but she didn’t fear him. With his eyes fixed upon hers, he swiftly stood, holding her up with one arm as if she weighed nothing. This was the other side to Ben, the fierce warrior, and she knew he could give her exactly what she needed.

He didn’t question her—she knew he wouldn’t—she could feel the taut energy in him as he held back. With her words, the fetters had snapped. His eyes were feral as he stared at her, and, in one surging motion, her hands had been removed from their entanglement in his hair and her back slammed against the hyperdrive control panel. One of his hands was able to pin both of hers above her head, a dominant position clearly intended to show her who was in control now.

*Yes, Ben, show me.*

His mouth was on hers, rough and hot, dragging her lip between his teeth. The pain of his bite drove her wild, causing her to clench around his thick warmth. She gasped in his mouth as he grunted from the sudden tightness, his resulting buck into her was rough and deep. *Yes. More.* Ben growled and repeated the powerful thrust, and she realized she must have said her thought aloud. She smiled and bit him back to reinforce what she wanted.

His hands slid down her body and wrapped around her hip, nails digging into her skin as he slid her over his throbbing shaft. The tears and soft looks were gone as he sucked bruises into her neck. Instinctively she wrapped her legs around his hips as his large palms kneaded her raw skin, his roughness only adding to her heightening arousal.

Ben began pounding up into her, giving her the jolting friction that she didn’t know she was so desperately craving. She hadn’t considered that this unyielding carnal intensity was possible, but, of course, his dark side was very much alive inside him, and she had just permitted him to allow it control. Rey shouldn’t have been surprised that this intensity was lying in wait underneath the surface.

It reminded her of sparring with him; his strikes were adept and focused, each thrust jarring and effective. She was again left breathless and in awe of his command over his body. Her brain was incapable of complex thoughts as he drove into her, but she knew later she would be teasing him about his proficient ability to "impale" and "dominate" with his weapon. She could see in his eyes that he went into the same place in his mind as when in battle. There was a sharpness, an acute perception, a confidence in his ability that made his movements effortless and natural. Ben had always been in his element on the battlefield, and she could see the same ease here. Of course, he would be good at this.

This was where he excelled, his energy all-consuming and strong as he manipulated the Force to
his will. Even in his fervor, he hadn’t abandoned the Force. It was when his hands released hers and returned to sliding up to her breasts that she recognized the energy holding her in place, suspending her body mid-air against the control panel, so he could thrust up into her with ferocity. Rey couldn’t be bothered to wonder if that was another misuse of the Force or if begging for his dark side would have consequences later. Her thoughts were focused on the feel of his teeth on her neck and the depth of him inside her as he shifted to find new angles.

She couldn’t contain her cries as she was completely lost to the friction of him against her tight, quivering walls. When she had been in control, there was a rolling pleasure that slowly built a heated tension inside her. Under his control, it was less "slow and rolling," and more "overwhelming and explosive." She had asked for the beast, and he had given it to her.

His guttural grunts and growls grew with fervency as he ripped cries of ecstasy from her throat with every rough slide of his length against a sensitive spot inside her. The obscene noises their bodies made as they slapped together only seemed to drive him into more of a frenzy, his touch fierce and possessive as she greedily took everything he could give. The darkness continued to swirl around them, his eyes black and sharp like a man possessed. As her own darkness swept into her mind, Rey lifted her hips and met each thrust with equal intensity. He moaned curses in languages she didn’t know existed.

The tightening heat inside her quickly approached a crescendo, the sensation becoming an almost unbearable amount of pleasure. She straddled an edge, prepared to fall, as she surrendered herself to everything that was Ben. Her nails dug into his skin as she clawed at him desperately. Every nerve in her body was alight; sweat glistened on her skin in her feverish state. She was lost to the overwhelming hunger of his touch. He showed her with every movement how much he craved her. Just when she thought the electrifying sensation was too much, she felt the Force wrap around her sensitive apex once more, vibrating and pulsing a combination that she knew would drag them both over the edge.

“Ben!” she cried, her legs tightening around his hips as she squeezed him. He bit down on her shoulder in retaliation, and that was all it took to release a powerful surge of electrical pulses through her body; her entire world became a blinding white light as her climax washed over her.

Rey felt as if her soul left her body for a moment. It was as if it danced in the energy around them with his, because when it came back to her, she felt as if he had left a part of himself with her. For that split second, she felt the lulling peace she had felt once in her dream of the Cosmic Force. There was no emotion, and the troubles of their past or concerns for their future were forgotten—the only difference was, this time, he was one with her.

As the blinding light faded and her senses returned, Rey felt a weightless sensation before the ship shuddered violently against her back. She opened her eyes to Ben’s sweaty form, collapsed on his knees before her. Her feet were still close to half a meter off the floor. Ben still had the sense to
retain his hold on the Force through the waves of pleasure that had overtaken his body. That, or he had held her physically until he had enough mental faculties return to regain control of the Force. Rey had little awareness of the past two minutes, but judging by the tremor in his strong arms caging her hips against the compartment wall, she would guess the latter. His forehead fell against her right thigh as he breathed heavily.

Looking up from where his head rested between her thighs, Rey realized the compartment around them was darker than before. Looking up further, she realized all the Falcon’s lights were off beside the emergency backup lights, casting them in a blue glow. That cleared the post-coital haze enough to remember the violent shuddering of the ship that she had felt earlier. “Ben, the ship… what happened?”

He didn’t move from his resting position, answering with heated huffs against her thigh. “I think we… we levitated the entire Falcon off the ground.” This wasn’t some rocks and sand as they had levitated before. In their shared incredibly satisfying passion, they had lost enough control to move an entire ship without either attempting to do so. When they had experienced their release, they released more than they had bargained for. While impressive—I bet your father can’t claim to do that, Ben—the implications were clear; if they didn’t learn to control it, the consequences could be catastrophic. They might have caused damage to the ship, and, in the future, they could kill themselves or others.

We’ll learn, she assured herself, together.

Concern pinched in his brows when he finally tilted his face up to her, his head still resting on her leg. Part of her wanted to remind him he could release her, but another part of her enjoyed the sight of him between her legs. It seemed once she had experienced sex, she had become insatiable. Insatiable, but exhausted; she tried her best to tamp down the desire.

“Are you….” he asked between heaving breaths, clearly still recovering as well, “Are you okay?”

She brushed her fingers through his damp hair. “Better than okay… Are you?” They both knew what she was asking.

Did I push you too far? Did allowing the darkness in give it power over you again? Do you regret it?

“I’m… it was… please don’t be afraid of me.”
Rey smiled. “Trust me, I wasn’t afraid, Ben. I just want to know if you’re okay?”

He closed his eyes, searching for the words. “I feel better. It was…freeing to just let go.” She knew the darkness would always be part of him, and if he had found a non-destructive outlet for it, that it was toe-curling was only a bonus. Toe-curling and life-altering.

“I hope you know I enjoyed every second of that, and when we climaxed together, I felt like a part of your soul was left behind,” she whispered.

Ben nodded. “I felt that, too.”

“You know what that means?” she said between calming breaths. “You’re mine forever now.”

“And you’re…mine?” The question was innocent enough, but his eyes were focused decidedly too low on her body. It was thrilling.

“Of course, Ben.” Her hand traveled down her abdomen, her fingers trailing through the mixture of her arousal and his spend accumulated between her thighs. He groaned. “You made me yours, didn’t you?” she asked suggestively, watching him stare in awe at the mixture of fluids they had created together.

As she pulled her fingers away, his hand shot up, grasping her around her wrist. Before she could blink, her glistening fingers were in his mouth. His warm tongue rolled over their collection of fluids, tasting her. Rey didn’t realize she had moaned at the sight until his eyes flashed up to hers. He released her fingers as his own drifted up either side of her thighs, his heated stare never leaving hers. When he reached the fluids that coated her, he gathered as much as he could on his finger.

Ben tasted their blend of release again, his eyes burning with a heat she hoped would consume her. Rey was convinced it was the most erotic act she had ever witnessed. She wondered if he enjoyed the taste of her; if he minded the taste of himself. This man was a far cry from the soft, tear-streaked man of a few minutes earlier. The darkness that still surrounded him left her breathless.

When he had finished sucking his fingers clean, he began pressing hot, open-mouthed kisses to her thigh. The soft skin there was sensitive, slightly ticklish, and the trail of saliva he left behind in the cool air combined to make her thighs quiver in anticipation. When he reached her center, she grabbed his hair to stop him. “Ben, you don’t want to do that.”
“I don’t?” he asked, his eyebrows raised, in a tone that reminded her much more of Kylo than Ben. “Do you not want me to, Rey?”

“I didn’t say that, but—”

“You have no idea how much I want this,” he breathed against her heated skin, the sensation sending a pleasant shiver up her back.

“Why would you want to? There’s me…and you…it’s a mess.”

He hummed. “And I was raised to clean up my messes.” That did it; Rey didn’t care to argue anymore. She wanted whatever his eyes were so hungry for. His hot breath against her skin caused more arousal to flood from her achingly empty core, as his hands steadied her trembling thighs. “Say you want it.”

Rey could only manage a flustered nod before the warmth of his tongue was upon her, sliding all the way from her puckered hole to her sensitive nub. Rey cried out at the overwhelming sensation, throwing her head back into a gentle cushion of Force, which protected her head from the control panel. Ben, ever the student, was learning quickly.

His tongue gathered more of their combined fluids as he repeated the action, drawing more cries from her lips. The absolute indecency of him lapping up his own spend drove her as wild as the feeling itself. When he had collected all the remnants on the outside, he moved to her center and began sucking her dry with his swollen lips.

Rey arched into him, writhing under his attention; the sounds he was making utterly and satisfyingly vulgar. Her entire body vibrated for him. The clothes in the compartment began to hover around him as she lost herself to the feeling, but with a flick of his hand, they fell to the floor again.

His tongue slipped inside her as she clenched around him, and Rey grabbed hold of his hair as if she were the one drowning in their arousal. She began rocking her hips into him as far as his hold in the Force would allow her. Speaking of the Force, it had found its way up to her apex again. The combination between the thrusts of his tongue inside her and the pulsing around her sensitive nub was quickly building that sparking tension again. His eyes never once left hers, watching as she fell apart by his sinful tongue.
Rey began rocking harder, tugging at his hair roughly, crying out into the compartment as she surrendered to the pleasure coursing through her. “Ben!” she cried as he was flooded with her release. Her legs clenched around his ears, her head lolling to the side as waves of ecstasy crashed over her, leaving her boneless and sated. He drank from her greedily, devouring it all until she was too sensitive for him to continue.

When he finished, the Force-hold disappeared, and she dropped into his waiting arms. She rested her cheek against his bare chest, reveling in the feel of his strong heartbeat. As he stood, the overhead lights blinked back on. Well, at least we didn’t permanently damage the ship. She looked up at him to catch the easy, boyish grin on his face.

“I didn’t think I could ever be this happy,” he said.

Rey knew she would never tire of seeing him happy; it was one of the most beautiful sights in the entire galaxy. He was alive, the man he was he meant to be, and completely hers. Warmth swelled to the furthest recesses of her soul like a healing balm, lessening the depth of the scars left behind by her past. The smile in his eyes didn’t fade when their eyes met. He studied her as if he could find the secrets of the universe there.

“We’re just getting started,” she replied. The realization that they had the rest of their lives, instead of just stolen moments, was thrilling. “Now go get us some clothes before Dev comes back.”

He chuckled, the softness in his eyes returning. “I’m more worried about offending Blue. He burst into the refresher once after a shower...those questions were unpleasant enough, I couldn’t imagine what he’d ask now.”

With a chaste kiss, he was climbing up the rungs, leaving Rey alone in the compartment. She glanced around at the clothes thrown on the floor and couldn’t help but smile. Being with Ben for the rest of her life would certainly never be boring. It was everything she could have ever wanted, and—as it turned out—a lot more. With the greatest threat to the galaxy rotting in the stomach of a Sarlacc, they could do whatever they wanted. It was an exhilarating thought. Her thoughts wandered to the future; where they would go, what they would see, where they would do that again. More than anything, she was excited to show the galaxy the true Ben Solo.

Her attention was drawn back to her bondmate by the shuddering of the compartment as Ben climbed back down the rungs. “They must be back. I found these,” he offered breathlessly, handing her darker grey trousers and a lighter grey shirt. Rey glanced down at the clothes in her hands and back to him. “You found the darkest clothes I own, didn’t you?” His only response was a snort. Though she teased him, she still pulled on the clothes he had brought her.
When she was done, he cupped her face and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead and then nose. Rey basked in the warmth of his attention. They were finally together like they should have been all along. She was grateful they had the rest of their lives to make up for it.

Moving around behind her, he sifted his fingers through the loose strands around her shoulders. "May I?"

Rey nodded, joyful tears brimming in her eyes. He would never know its significance to her. “I missed this so much, Ben.”

“Me too,” he murmured as his fingers moved nimbly through her hair, piecing together her heart as he restored each strand to the place it held six months prior, mending the suffering they endured while apart. He had been wrong before in their shared dream: his fingers were not too big, and he didn’t take entirely too long. Rey savored his gentle touch, never wanted it too end. But all too quickly, her hair was pulled back into the elegant braid. When he was finished, his fingers moved to her wrist. She hadn’t removed the ribbon once in the last six months and it seemed like a bigger step than it should have been to untie it. She reminded herself she didn’t need it anymore, because he was there with her. With a swift tug, the material slipped free, baring the skin of her wrist. Ben secured the tie in her hair where it belonged. She sighed in content. It was the life she had never thought possible for so long.

If there was any good that came from his death and their subsequent separation, it had given her appreciation for the little moments. When he was gone, she had missed his smile, his eyes, his energy, his thoughts in her head, and the ways he showed her he loved her, like braiding her hair. There were many things she wouldn’t have realized she was missing if he had never returned to her. There was the physical intimacy, of course, which had been galaxy-altering. But of all the moments she imagined never having the chance to experience, nothing hurt as profoundly as never watching Ben care for his son. The thought that it could have been different was never far from her mind, and she would be forever grateful that they had another chance.

When Ben was finished, he turned her to inspect his work. With a satisfied nod, he scooped her up and threw her over a shoulder as if she weighed nothing. She squealed in response. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you to watch the sunrise,” he answered. He growled as he bit at her thigh playfully. Rey could feel the darkness around him already fading, but the thought of it returning, maybe after a nap, was an exhilarating thought. Without further ado, he tightened his grip on her legs, using his other arm to grab a rung and pull them up the ladder.
“Ben Solo, I can walk!” she shouted as she pounded on his back playfully. They both knew full well that she could escape his grasp if she wanted, but, as independent as she was, there was something exhilarating about being carried around by Ben Solo. Returning to the main floor of the Falcon, Ben shifted her back in his arms and onto the floor.

The deep timbre of his voice rumbled through his chest as he spoke. “Hi, kid.” Rey turned around to see the small boy standing in the corridor, covered in sand to the point it couldn’t have been an accident, holding the Porg to his chest and an outstretched holoprojector. The blue projection of Rose over holo was staring back at her, mouth agape.

“Auntie Rose wants to talk to you, Rey.”

There must have been something about her smile, the flush to her face, or that Ben had just been carrying her, because a knowing smile crossed Rose’s face. “No, that’s okay, Rey. You can call me later after you and Ben are done making me more nieces and nephews.”

Dev tilted his head. “What is she talking about?”

“Nothing.” Ben groaned.

“Rose!” Finn was shouting in the background. “I don’t need that visual in my head!” That only served to make Rose cackle harder.

“Bye, Auntie Rose, bye, Uncle Finn,” Dev said and turned off the holoprojector. His eyes lifted to Ben with an accusatory glare. “What were you doing down there?”

“Fixing the hyperdrive,” she and Ben answered in unison. Rey bit back her giggle, knowing "fixing the hyperdrive" would never mean the same thing again. Dev studied them both carefully, another question in his eyes, but he shrugged instead.

“Okay.”

Ben bent to scoop her up again, and she jumped away. “Ben Organa Solo, don’t you dare!” With a twitch of his hand, the Force pushed against Rey, dragging her to him. It was so unexpected, she hadn’t thought to fight back.
“Rey…I do dare,” he said, throwing her over a shoulder. She put up the appearance of fighting back, but it was difficult to do in between fits of laughter.

“Better get used to it; he does this a lot,” Dev said, “Mostly when I don’t want to shower.”

Pausing by the boy, Ben bent down and threw him over a shoulder as well. Ben coughed as he inhaled a cloud of dust. “What have I told you about brushing off before coming inside?”

“I did!” Dev insisted.

“I’ll have to make a sonic shower for you outside, won’t I?” Rey said from Ben’s other shoulder.

“That sounds super fun!” Dev was kicking his legs in excitement, triggering another dust cloud, but then there was a spike in the Force and his legs immediately stilled. Instead of panicking over the loss of control over his body, the boy seemed completely undisturbed by the turn of events. “How did you do that?”

“The Force,” Ben said as he sauntered down the corridor. With each step, a small cloud of fine sand formed around the boy, and Rey wondered how it was possible. She had lived most of her life on a desert planet. Not even after a sandstorm had she been so dirty. He certainly did attract it, to the point that it must be purposeful.

“I think I like the Force,” Dev said over the screeching of the Porg. “Did Rey give it back to you?”

Ben hummed. “Maybe she did.” He set Rey down on the boarding ramp and then the boy between them. From where they stood, they had a spectacular view of the horizon. They also had a view of the “artwork” the two droids were creating in the sand by spinning in circles. Rey glanced at the horizon as the first light broke over the sand. The reds and oranges were beautiful, but Rey found herself drawn back to study Ben instead. The silence was heavy around him, and she wondered what he was thinking.

Dev was the first to break the silence. “Ben Organa Solo…Your whole family name is Organa Solo?”
Whatever thoughts had consumed him in reticence were lost as he dragged his attention back to them. With a half-smile, he nodded and knelt next to Dev. He stalled in responding as he brushed the sand from the boy. They all coughed from the cloud it created. “Officially, I guess it is,” Ben answered after his coughing fit, “as is yours. Dev Anakin Organa Solo.”

“What’s your whole family name Rey?” the boy asked as Ben moved him this way and that to reach all the sand he had somehow covered himself with. As Ben meticulously tidied the boy’s clothes, Dev plucked the sand from the Porg’s feathers. When Rey didn’t immediately answer, his soulful brown eyes found hers.

“I’m just Rey,” she said with a shrug. For the first time, she found it didn’t bother her. What she had been searching for her entire life couldn’t be found in a last name. What she had was far greater.

“Like Uncle Finn?” Dev had abandoned his attempt at brushing off the Porg to study her, almost as if he were reading her thoughts like his father once did. She nodded. Evidently, he had spent a considerable amount of time on that holocall with her friends if he knew that. “Why do you have only one name?”

Rey thought of Ben and the history and legacies carried by his names, about the markers that told his family’s story. She thought of how far he had come, after running from it for so long, denying who he was. She had been the opposite. She had yearned for that name, she had searched for that legacy in everyone, but she had finally found it in herself. Ben had sought to escape the legacy of legends, and she had sought to become a part of one. They had only found themselves when they had accepted the truth that was their families. How could she explain something so significant to who they both were?

“My parents abandoned me,” she finally said. “They didn’t leave behind a legacy worth remembering. Because that is what a last name is. It’s not just a name, it’s a family name. It’s a reminder of where you belong and that someone loved you enough to share that legacy with you. I realized I didn’t need that to be someone. But you’re very lucky to have the name you do, Dev.”

Ben’s smile was warm and proud, but Dev was less satisfied with her answer. He turned to look at Ben and then back at her. “Ben shared his with me. Can I share it with you?”

“That’s not quite how it works,” she said, shaking her head with a smile. “But it’s okay, I’ve never needed one.” It was a freeing thought. She was no longer shackled to her past.

“Would you want one?”
Ben’s voice was so soft she barely heard him. When she turned to him, there was a strange expression in his eyes, a significance she couldn’t place. “I had a chance to learn my former name, remember?” she reminded him. “I chose to keep the name I picked for myself than be ‘complete’ with a name that means nothing to me.”

“What about my family name?” he said as his stare returned to the horizon. “Does that mean anything you?”

“Of course, it does. It means more than you know, but I wasn’t born an Organa Solo.” Rey glanced down at Dev, but he was focused on Ben. “Or adopted by one. Which is a good thing, considering how this all worked out. I chose my family, I chose you both, and that’s better than a last name.” Ben nodded, but his stare didn’t return to her. The bond may have been missing, but Rey knew him better than anyone. He worried his lip, and it was all the proof she needed that something was bothering him. “Ben, what’s wrong?” His only response was to swallow heavily with his eyes fixed on the sunrise.

“Yes, say that,” Dev whispered to his father, as if he knew what he was thinking.

Ben stared down at the boy for a moment before he turned to her. Whatever he had to say, it was significant, because he looked absolutely terrified. “Rey, I choose you, too,” he murmured. “We both do.” Ben stepped forward and cupped her face so he could search her eyes for an unasked question. She was silent as his piercing stare read her soul for the answer he so desperately sought. He must have found his answer, because he looked down at the boy in another silent question. Dev nodded. Ben turned back to her, chewing his words, then exhaled slowly as he found his voice. “You’re right, you never needed a family name, but if you want one…” His eyes met hers again. They were soft and warm and full of love. “Then we want to give you ours.”

Rey stood frozen for a moment as the implication of his words settled between them. What he was asking—it meant far more than taking his name. It was taking the name of Leia and Han and their legendary legacies. It was an eternal connection to the Skywalkers—to Luke and Anakin—a connection to the compassion and horror, the tragedy and hope that the name brought to the galaxy. But, most importantly, it was an eternal connection to Ben and Dev.

With tears pooling in her eyes, she nodded with a hopeful smile. “I want that, too.” Dev jumped into her arms with a squeal, and Ben pulled her into him. He laughed as if happiness had always come easy to him, as if he hadn’t been broken, manipulated, and tormented his entire life. Ben’s arm tightened around Rey as they stood at the edge of the boarding ramp, watching the dual suns climb higher over the horizon, painting the entire sky red. Dev laid his head on her shoulder as he grasped his cooing Porg tightly to his chest.
She tilted her chin to stare up at Ben, studying his face for a clue to his thoughts. The orange of the sunrise reflected in his eyes, and his face was illuminated by a dimpled smile. It warmed her more than the dual suns ever could. With dawn would come a promise of change. Their time in this place so deeply rich in Skywalker history was coming to an end. She knew she would be leaving behind more than grave markers, yet it wasn’t somber. She would always carry the past with her, but with Ben and Dev by her side, there was only hope. This would be the first day of the rest of their lives.

Rey smiled to herself and leaned into him, taking in the last moments of the sunrise. *I have a good feeling about this.*
Mature content

Two characters engage in consensual sex. A bit of it. I avoided specifically naming the male/female anatomy to the best of my ability per the request of the person I wrote this for. While those triggers were avoided, this still carries very descriptive, explicit content.

To avoid these scenes, please stop reading below the line following the words, "Rey lifted herself onto her heels so he would meet her stare. 'Show me the galaxy, Ben.'

About 80% through the chapter, you will find another line followed by the words "'I didn’t think I could ever be this happy,' he said." It is safe to begin reading again from that point.

It's only some misuse of the Force between those two points, so you're not missing anything important to the narrative.
This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Rey blinked into the light. Her vision was hazy and out of focus, but she could just make out two suns in the sky. She was weary and tired, as if she had been walking across a desert for days, but she couldn’t remember where she had been before this place. Come to think of it, where was she now?

I can’t remember.

She was on her knees, touching cool, black stone. Her fingers traced over a name: General Leia Organa Solo. It was a grave marker, she realized. Something told her she had seen this marker, that she had been to this place before. Someone grasped her arm, gentle yet firm, helping her stand. “Leia is such a pretty name,” Rey told the person guiding her. “It sounds strong and brave.”

“I suppose it does,” a voice—a woman’s voice—said beside her. The woman began humming something as they went. A lullaby. Rey had known it, too, she thought, once upon a time.

She shuffled slowly, her body weaker than she remembered. As she walked past a newer row of markers, she focused intently through her blurry vision to read the names. Landonis Balthazar Calrissian. Senator Poe Dameron. Senator Neek’o Dameron. Rose Tico. There was a blank marker next to the last woman’s name, and she could almost recall the person it was reserved for. A man’s face with a wide, beaming smile flashed before her eyes. Further down the row, there was a large group of individuals of different genders and species standing around another grave marker. Something about each one of their faces, some young, some old, sparked a familiarity in her heart. She found she was smiling through the dampness on her face. Was she crying?

The woman holding her had dark hair streaked with grey, and she was crying, too. Her freckled face seemed awfully familiar. The woman smiled at Rey reassuringly as she brought her forward through the crowd, telling her the names of the others, but Rey couldn’t concentrate on the words. A man with chestnut-colored hair stood by the marker, whispering something as he trailed his fingers over the dark stone. Another man knelt on the ground next to him, his greying raven hair falling over his eyes. Rey knew him.
“Ben?”

The man turned, tear tracks cutting through the fine dust smeared across the moles and freckles on his cheek. His liquid brown eyes meet her stare immediately. Upon seeing her, he attempted to wipe away the tears, which only served to smear more dust there. He extended his hand to her with a smile. When she placed her hands in his, she noticed how wrinkled and stiff they were. It didn’t seem quite right; didn’t match with how she remembered them. Nothing seemed right. She knew all these people, but she couldn’t remember them. She couldn’t remember anything. She couldn’t remember where she was, she couldn’t remember why she was there, she didn’t know why they were all crying, but seeing his gentle smile comforted her. “Hey, Ma, it’s me. It’s Dev.”

“Dev.” For an instant, the joyful laugh of a young boy echoed in her mind. She pulled a hand away from his grasp to touch his face with trembling fingers. “My sweet Dev. But you were just a boy….” Rey tried to remember the last memory she had before this place, but every time she grasped onto the fragment of a solid memory, it seemed to crumble away.

Dev’s large palm came up to trap her hand against his cheek. “I’m all grown up now, remember?” he reminded her with renewed tears in his eyes. The way he said it was kind, but she felt as if he was repeating something he had said many times before. Perhaps he had.

A thought came to her mind, and she said the words before she considered them: “Where’s your brother and sister?”

His smile was gentle. “They’re here,” he murmured in his soothing deep baritone as he glanced up at the man and woman standing next to her. “Everyone’s here, just like you wanted.”

“Where’s my Ben?”

There was something different in his eyes when she asked that question, a sorrow that welled as he studied her face. That searching stare…there was something so familiar about it. He looked to the woman at her side before returning his gaze to Rey. Smiling up at her through tears, his large fingers rubbed gentle circles in her hand as he found the words.

“Right here, Ma,” he said, his voice breaking as he turned to reveal the grave marker.

*Jedi Master Ben Skywalker Organa Solo,* it read.
Rey touched the name, and a lifetime of memories flashed before her eyes for just a moment before they were lost to the shadow of her mind again. Though the memories were gone, the love she experienced was not. What was left behind was an overwhelming feeling of happiness. It should have broken her heart that the other half of her soul was gone, but it didn’t. Despite staring at his grave marker, she couldn’t help but smile.

“What are you smiling about?” the man with chestnut hair asked her.

“I’m happy because he was happy. I can’t see it, but I can feel it. Our life together—it was a good one, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was,” the man replied, wrapping his arm around the woman next to Rey as tears fell freely down both their faces. The grief was still new. This was what they were there for, she realized—him. There was something just under the surface that left her beaming with pride that there were so many people who loved him. Rey turned to the crowd. She knew them, she knew she did; her mind was just a little foggy.

The woman took Rey’s arm and guided her to the others. The chestnut-haired man followed, offering his arm to aid in her walk across the fine sand. Rey graciously accepted; the walk was more taxing than she was expecting. The two spoke back and forth to each other, but it was difficult for her to pay attention as she walked. Before she lost focus, the man said something along the lines of, “Do you remember the time….”

Rey watched her feet kick up the sand, and something flickered in the darkness from a lifetime before Ben, of days spent crossing deserts alone. She was grateful that she wasn’t alone here. A sound caught somewhere between sobbing and laughter brought her back to the present. “Yes, he sure did,” the woman said warmly as she dried her tears. “I’ll always remember that about him.”

When they reached the crowd, they turned to face the grave markers. The man placed his arm around Rey to steady her. It was kind; her body was tired. The woman rested her head on Rey’s shoulder, and the smell of her hair was comforting and familiar, like a favorite home-cooked meal.

Dev pulled the long, dark hilt of a weapon off his belt. A bright blue light burst from inside it. No, not a light, it was a blade. Somehow, Rey knew it was a blade. Two smaller blue blades flashed to life a few seconds later, and something about it brought a warmth to her heart. Dev extinguished the blade and stared wistfully at the weapon, tossing it in his palm for a moment as if reliving memories of his own.

A dark-colored droid rolled up next to him, speaking in a language Rey couldn’t quite remember.
Dev reached down and gave the droid a comforting pat… she could almost drag his name from the shadows of her memories. The droid produced a blue flame from his tool arm and held it next to the grave marker. She didn’t know what the droid said, but she knew it was emotional, because Dev choked back another sob as he nodded. After a moment, the droid extinguished the flame, and Dev laid the dark hilt next to the grave marker.

Bowing his head, Dev grasped the dark stone with both hands. He clenched his eyes shut, his body shaking with grief. He gripped onto that grave marker as if it were keeping him upright. Then Rey felt something—it was strong and tender and warm. *Love.* It didn’t make sense, but it felt like a powerful…energy…surrounded her. Dev stood silently for a moment, lost to his own thoughts, then knelt and rested his forehead on the dark stone.

“I love you, Dad.”

*I love you too, son.*

Rey could hear Ben’s voice echo through her memories, repeating words she was certain she had heard a thousand times before. Dev exhaled slowly, then pushed himself back from the marker, letting go at the last moment. As he joined the others, he wiped the sorrow from his eyes.

A small, raven-haired girl cut through the crowd to jump into Dev’s arms. “My favorite girl!” he huffed, spinning her around. The girl carried a small creature with her that made an awful shrieking noise that no one in the galaxy could find pleasant. Dev, however, seemed fond of the thing as he tickled its belly. Rey smiled despite the atrocious noise.

There was only happiness and love in her heart as she was surrounded by people she knew meant the galaxy to her. One man read to her from a book filled with beautiful handwriting as others stood around and listened. Several people stood before the crowd and told stories about him. Some laughed. Some cried. But whatever they did, Rey could see their love for him.

There was a group that introduced themselves as her students. There were many people introduced to her, but the names Temiri, Thexan, and Taryn were familiar. They showed her their weapon hilts and the fiery blades of blue, green and yellow. They regaled her and the others with stories about Ben and a Jedi temple.

As she grew more tired, many broke away to walk through the grave markers. Parents pointed out names, telling stories to the older children. A green and yellow droid that seemed achingly familiar entertained the younger ones. Then a man who came up to Rey—the man with the beaming smile. He was much older now, his dark hair had mostly grown grey. The three women by his side
referred to her as "Auntie" as they each hugged her. When he stood before her, there was sadness, but also love in his eyes.

“I remember you,” Rey told him.

He laughed. “You better; I just saw you this morning.” He embraced the man and woman next to her with a comfortable fondness. Then he gripped Dev’s shoulder in silent support and tickled the tummy of the little girl in his arms. Dev called him “Uncle,” and she knew that this man was her brother. Rey felt her love for him.

“How are you holding up?” her brother asked quietly, words only meant for her. She could see the concern written plainly on his face. Instead of answering his question, she just hugged him. There was nothing else to say. She knew she should be sad that Ben was gone, but she couldn’t find it in her to mourn him. It was almost as if there was something just beyond her perception—a feeling—that he wasn’t quite gone…not the way the others believed. Rey could almost feel him there with them. There was a soothing peace in her mind, telling her that everything would be all right.

Her brother said his goodbyes, then walked with the women to another grave marker. It was the marker she had noticed before, the one with the name Rose Tico. Her brother knelt by the grave marker, using his sleeve to clean the dust from the stone. Then he meticulously cleared the ground of debris. Whoever that woman had been to him, he loved her very much.

Rey turned to the man and woman by her side to ask them about the person belonging to that name. They were looking at her with such love, and she felt such overwhelming love in return that she forgot her question. With trembling hands, she reached out to hug them, too. “I love you both, I know I do, I can feel it,” she told them. They each returned her embrace, squeezing her just a little too tight.

Dev crossed the sand when he saw them. With a wave of her hand, Rey beckoned him closer. When he stepped forward, she dragged him into the embrace as well. “I’m proud of you,” she said, because something inside told her that he needed to hear it. “Your father is proud of you, too.”

He nodded through tears. “Thanks, Ma.”

When she finally released him and stepped back, the man and woman turned to embrace Dev fully. He held them both as they all sobbed. She smiled, bringing her hands up to her chest. Something about the moment made her heart full. Although she didn’t know who they were to one another, she did know one thing: they had each other. They would be all right, because they were not alone.
There was a hand on her wrist, pulling at an old, frayed piece of fabric tied there, and she turned to see a short, humanoid woman with goggles. “Rey Solo,” the woman smiled, pulling Rey down to her level. “You’re still in there, I see.” Rey nodded and smiled. A memory from a lifetime before—kneeling before this woman as she offered her the silver hilt of a weapon—flashed quickly through her mind. But as swiftly as the memory appeared, it was gone.

“I’ve been to many gatherings like these over the years,” the woman said, adjusting her goggles, “different faces, but the love’s the same. I think I’ll remember this one for a while. It’s beautiful to see the impact two young, not-so-star-crossed lovers made on the galaxy.” Rey couldn’t imagine what she and the man she loved had done to bring all these people together on the desert planet, let alone fathom what impact they’d had on the entire galaxy. It was nice to imagine, though. “Can you believe it? All these friends and students and children and grandchildren here to honor Ben Solo.”

The familiar woman cackled then, as if someone had answered something sarcastic back. Rey felt…something. Or someone. Many someones. It felt as if they were standing right there, waiting for her to see them, but she couldn’t quite find the right way to do it. If she listened hard enough, she could almost hear that familiar lullaby, gruff whimpers and growls, a carefree laugh, and an amused chuckle. She could almost hear others, too. They all seemed so…happy. She wished she could remember who they had been to her, these phantom memories.

**Soon,** a familiar voice told her. **Soon you’ll remember, sweetheart.**

The humanoid woman adjusted her goggles, as Rey searched around her for the people she knew were there. “Do you feel him?”

“Yes,” Rey whispered as a warm breeze blew through her hair. “I do.”

“He’s coming back for you soon, child.”

Rey smiled.
Chapter End Notes

Discussion of death

Major character death (in the recent past).
Across the Stars

Chapter Summary

This is it. The last chapter. I hope you all enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it. I want to thank my family, my husband and my children for all of their support. Thank you to Meauxwalk and ReadingAlltheBest for all her help with editing. And to my readers. There may be few of you, but your enthusiasm about the story means the world today.

Update, thank you to my cousin Anna for the wonderful picture for the ending. And thank you to my sister, Wren, for the picture collages for each chapter.

Chapter Notes

This is a dark story that delves into both psychological and physical trauma. Many of these chapters WILL have triggering content. As I am a firm believer that tagging reveals major plot points of a story, not all warnings are tagged. I DO think every reader should be able to make informed decisions about triggering content, however. As a compromise, I will provide warnings at the end of each chapter along with a brief explanation of the triggers. If you find certain material triggering, PLEASE read the end notes of each chapter first. If you find a certain chapter triggering, I would be more than happy to explain the major plot points of the chapter. This story in 100 percent finished so I can also answer any questions about triggers in part one as well as future chapters in part two. If you MUST know the ending, I can answer those questions over message as well, but I might die a little inside. You've been warned, with it finishing around 700,000 words, this is a definite slow burn.
There was a moment, when her eyes were still closed, that Rey existed between the dream and reality. The Force held her there, soothing her slowly into wakefulness. There was something about the dream, something that felt...real. It wasn’t the first dream she’d had about Ben’s death; it likely wouldn’t be the last, but this one was different. It should have upset her. For reasons she couldn’t explain, it didn’t. Rey felt as she had in the dream. Peaceful. Happy. Accepting. Perhaps she felt that way because, though she didn’t remember it, she knew they lived a good life. Or perhaps she felt that way because she knew it was only a dream. Ben wasn’t gone. The Force assured her of that.
Only, when Rey opened her eyes sleepily and looked to the pillow next to her, Ben wasn’t there. It wasn’t unusual. Ben would wake with Dev – who rose with the dawn. Ben insisted he woke her up every morning when he left, but she never remembered the words he told her. For the first few moments after waking, opening her eyes to his empty side of the bed was especially panic inducing after what she had experienced. Most mornings, her eyes would settle on the snack he always left for her on his pillow, and her feelings of peace would return. Perhaps, one day, when she realized he wouldn’t be taken away from her again, those fears would fade. Ben never said it aloud, but she knew he left those snacks as a reminder that the nightmares were over, he had returned to her in every way he could.

Unfortunately this morning, when she glanced to his pillow, two big, creepy eyes appeared, followed by an obnoxious shrieking. She gasped, and the creature disappeared, likely back to the depths of Hell. The bed around her was bouncing, and she looked up to see a dirty, raven-haired boy jumping around with a Porg in his arms.

“Dev, it’s way too early for this,” she groaned, but she couldn’t be angry with him. As comforting as her dream had been, she wasn’t ready for him to be an adult yet. They still had endless possibilities with the time they had together. It was the ultimate gift, and she could only be grateful to the Force for the chance, even when a dirty child and his irritating creature were bouncing around in her bunk. His little fingers wrapped around her hand and she reluctantly pushed herself to a stand, abandoning the warmth of the covers. “Okay, I’m up,” she grumbled.

“Now, jump,” he said simply.

Rey never had a normal childhood, but Dev had a way of showing her a new perspective of the galaxy through his eyes. So, when he resumed his jumping, she joined him. Soon her own laughter mingled with his hysterical giggles. If she used the Force to help them bounce just a bit higher, then it still wasn’t the most inappropriate way she had ever used the Force. She had grown quite creative in that department. As her mind wandered back to Ben, Rey reached down and plucked the bowl of fruit from his pillow and wondered what had distracted him enough to allow Dev to escape his watch.

She remembered the first night they started sharing a bed, when Ben slept twelve hours straight. Dev hadn’t come in to wake either of them, and – after they panicked – they found Dev in the galley with Lando on holocall teaching him how to “cook.” Rey could only imagine what trouble the boy had gotten into before he decided to wake her up. She wondered how long he had been alone? Where was Ben? After that dream, no amount of reassurances that Ben was there would be as comforting as Ben himself.

Wrapping her arm around Dev’s waist, she threw him down into the pillows. The boy giggled and popped up again, resuming his bouncing.
“Do it again.”

Rey was already standing, searching for clothes to wear so she wouldn’t wander around the *Falcon* in sleep attire. Without turning, she flicked her wrist, and the Force pushed him down into the pillows again. She smiled as she pulled at the red tie around her wrist. “Ben is *not* going to like all the dirt in his bed.”

“It’s sand,” the boy said matter-of-factly, bouncing up again. Through the mirror, she watched his eyes follow her as she searched through the drawers Ben had set aside for her—that he had set aside for her long before she had arrived on Tatooine. The movement rattled the pots of flowers and plants decorating the top. She touched the white petals of the Century flower, the one flower she had brought aboard with her. There were dozens more now, specimens Ben had found on his travels that she knew he had collected for her, even if he didn’t admit it. There were bowls of fruit there too, Jogan fruit, to ensure she never felt hunger again.

“I saw your dream,” Dev said behind her. Only then did she realize he had stopped jumping and was staring at her intently.

Rey turned back to the boy, her stomach knotting in anxiety. If he had seen her dream, she knew what it meant. She tried to hide the nerves in her voice. “Did you?”

“I was *old,*” he said with a grimace. “I didn’t like it; it was sad.”

Rey had hundreds of questions for him. *How did you see it? Can you control what you see? Did you feel the Force in the dream, too? Do you have visions? Was it your vision?* She knew she was not the only one who needed to hear those answers. She would have to tell Ben about Dev’s growing powers, but, for now, she just enjoyed the moment for what it was. If her life turned out to be anything like that dream, she would consider herself lucky. “Yes, but it was happy, too.”

Dev studied her for a moment, with deep, penetrating eyes just like his father. She knew a thousand thoughts were bouncing around behind that gaze. Dev was a cheerful and animated boy, suffering none of the mercurial emotional struggles that his father had as a child, but he was unusually pensive as he stared at her. “How was it happy?” he finally asked. “Ben died.”

Rey stepped forward wrapped him in a warm embrace, obnoxious pet and all. “Yes, he died, but that wasn’t the important part,” she replied, remembering the family and friends that loved them, the *life* they had built together. “The important part was he *lived.*” How could she explain that,
when Ben’s life had slipped through her fingers on the bottom of that escape craft, that dream was everything she had yearned for? How could she explain what had almost been?

Her thoughts were interrupted when Dev whispered, “Yeah, he said that too.”

Rey pulled back from their embrace. “Ben knows? Did he see the dream?”

“No, not Ben,” Dev said as if it were obvious, rolling his eyes. Her breath hitched from the implication, but the Porg chose that moment to burst from the boy’s arms and fly from the room. Without another word, the boy hopped down from the bed, chasing after it.

She tried to call after him, but she couldn’t find the words. Dev was hearing voices, too, and she panicked that their greatest fears had been realized. If Sidious had found Dev, they could help him, protect him, but she knew Ben would never be at peace again.

Rey closed her eyes, searching the Force for evidence of that monster’s revolting energy, but she found other familiar energies instead. To her overwhelming relief, there was nothing sinister looking after their boy. They had all played significant roles in both Ben and Rey’s lives; of course they would look after Dev as well. Rey focused on one of the bright energies. “So you’re responsible for the dream,” she said with a wink to the empty room.

There was another warm energy that touched against her mind and then she heard a familiar voice shout across the ship. “I’m up here, sweetheart!” They hadn’t spoken in-depth about the reemergence of his powers, but Ben didn’t seem bothered by using them like second nature again. Rey knew the touch against her mind had been his way of checking up on her, knowing how she feared to wake alone. As comforting as the dream had been, it was reassuring to hear his voice again.

After dressing, Rey stepped out into the corridor in search of Dev. “Tag, you’re it!” she heard him yell in another part of the ship. There was a soft rattle across the floor as he ran away to hide. That was followed by the rumbling clatter of two astromech droids as they chased after him. Though a conversation with Dev about the dream was unavoidable, for now she left him to play. There was another unavoidable conversation she couldn't ignore—a conversation with Ben about Dev’s Force-sensitivity. She turned to search for Ben instead.

The sublight engines were throttling up when she entered the cockpit, likely preparing for hyperspace. When she entered the cockpit, she smiled. His long body was hunched forward unnaturally in the copilot’s chair. She quietly approached him to see what he held in his fingers. The weapon he wielded was greater than any other weapon that had found familiarity in his hand.
It was the most powerful weapon of all. He dipped the stylus into the inkwell in his hand, then moved back to the parchment laid across his lap. A sword could kill hundreds, but words were far more lethal.

He concentrated intently; each stroke graceful and refined. His steady hand was practiced and skilled. Without turning around, he spoke evenly as he concentrated on his work. “I know you're watching me, Rey.”

“What are you writing?” she asked softly, taking a seat in the open pilot’s chair. She was mesmerized as his hand flowed fluidly over the parchment.

Ben looked carefree as he smiled, dimples accenting his cheeks, his crinkling eyes still focused on the parchment. “You told me once in a dream to surprise you.”

“Speaking of dreams…” she drawled. “I had a dream this morning, and Dev told me all about what he saw in it when I woke up.”

Ben dropped the stylus onto the parchment. Exhaling through a shuddered breath, his eyes slowly lifted to hers. “He is Force-sensitive then.”

It wasn’t a question. Ben could sense the Force again; she knew he felt it. Dev was strong in the Force, and it grew more every day. There had been a time when it was a question, but they had both seen the signs; they knew this was an eventuality. This was the final proof they were waiting for. After what he struggled with in his childhood, she knew it had been difficult for Ben to accept. But when he said those words, he didn’t sound disappointed or panicked. That gave her hope. “Yeah, but I think he’ll be okay.”

“You do?” he asked. She saw the same hope mirrored in his eyes.

“I do,” she assured him, reaching for his hand. “He has you and me, and I think he has some people watching over him in the Force, too. And if the dream comes true, then we have nothing to worry about.”

Ben glanced down at their hands as he absently smoothed his thumb over her palm. When he met her stare again, his eyes were knowing. “Force dream?”
“Mhmm.”

His tone but hopeful, but she sensed his hesitation. “Good one?”

Though it had meant everything to her, it had softened her lingering fears of losing him, something told her the dream wasn’t meant for him. Something told her he wouldn’t want to know. The future would happen as the Force destined it. Whatever happened, they had been given the chance of now. In the end, that was all that mattered. “I think so,” she replied softly.

There was a question in his eyes, but he swallowed the words. Instead, he nodded slowly, and the corner of his lip lifted in a grin. “Good.” Ben’s shoulders relaxed as he lifted the stylus again. He returned to sweep his hand across the parchment in long, controlled strokes.

“What are you writing?”

Ben bit his lip and shook his head playfully. “You said to surprise you.”

Rey leaned over in her seat to get a glimpse at his work, but he laid his arm across his parchment. “I changed my mind!” she laughed, pulling at his arm. He hummed in response, then slowly curled his large frame over what he was writing.

She scrunched her nose, failing to bite back a giggle. At the sound of her laugh, his eyes lifted to study her smile. With an easy grin transforming his face, he reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. She loved that he always found a reason to touch her, reassuring her with every glance and caress that he loved her. Usually, she reveled in the attention, but she wanted to see what he was creating. Attempting to use his distraction to her advantage, she held his stare and stretched for the parchment. A sly grin twitched on his lips, and she realized he had slowly been dragging his work from her reaching fingers. “Please, Ben, give me a hint!”

His smile faded as he hesitated. When he spoke again, his voice was heavy with significance. “Everything….”

“Everything?”

Ben carefully placed his stylus down, blowing gently on the parchment. “You’ve been telling Dev the story of the Skywalkers every night, and I thought…what if…we wrote down everything. We
could tell our story.”

*Our story.*

Rey remembered a dream she had once of a future where Ben hadn’t been saved. She had lived a life in his memory and had told their story to any lifeform who would listen. Their story had been of two force-sensitive enemies on the opposite side of war, who were forced together by circumstance and found understanding in a place they never expected. Despite the odds stacked against them, they found belonging in each other and slowly fell into a forbidden love. That love was enough to save them both from darkness and the galaxy in return. The story she had told in that dream was a tragedy—one that ended in sacrifice and the separation between the two lovers, but it had been a beautiful story all the same. Now, as she imagined their story, it was no longer a tragedy but a story of compassion, forgiveness, redemption, and hope. “I love that idea, Ben.”

He chewed his lip, and she knew him well enough to recognize when there was something more he had to say. She grasped his hand in silent support. “Dev,” he whispered after a moment, “he’s Force-sensitive; he’ll need a teacher. Teachers. We could do it, Rey, you and I.”

“I have some things I have to do…worlds I have to help heal from the war,” he said, exhaling slowly before continuing. “But one day, I thought…. Well, I thought maybe you were right; maybe the Jedi religion doesn’t *have* to die. I burned down Luke’s temple; my choices led to the destruction of his Order. The Force let you save me for some reason…maybe it was to fix what I destroyed. I know I’m not exactly Jedi material, but I thought—”

“No,” she said firmly before he could continue.

He blinked. It was plainly not the answer he was expecting. “No?”

“No, you don’t get to believe lies about yourself anymore. If you’re not Jedi material, then who is?” she demanded. “If the man who not only sacrificed his own life, but made the impossible choice to save the galaxy from a monster over saving the one he loves, then who *is* Jedi material, Ben? You made terrible choices in the past, but you fought to right your wrongs and you still continue to fight. You are *everything* a Jedi should be.”

His grin was soft, but it reached his eyes. “*You’re* everything a Jedi should be.”

“We both are,” she said unwaveringly, recalling the passage from the Jedi text *Journey of the*
Whills. “First comes the day, then comes the night. After the darkness shines through the light. The difference, they say, is only made right by the resolving of gray, through refined Jedi sight.”

His grin widened. “Well, Luke’s Jedi texts are a start, but we need new texts. We can throw out all the old rules; create something new. Maintain morality and order, yes, but not something with such a myopic focus on one way of being. And you’re right, grey; not fully light or dark.”

“A Grey Jedi Order,” she said slowly, trying out the words. It sounded…promising. For once, she didn’t fear whether it could be somewhere they belonged. The flaws of the Jedi Order would have always doomed Ben and Rey to failure. Luke recognized that by the time she found him on Ahch-To. He had tried to explain to her that the Jedi Order needed to die, and now she understood what he meant. The galaxy still needed heroes to fight for the good, but they didn’t need a stack of old books to do it. Luke had failed, but he had passed on that knowledge to show them what could arise from the old Order’s ashes. He had shown them what was important, what was worth fighting for. They could pass on what they had learned; they could grow beyond their master. “But how would we do that?”

“The old Jedi code read: ‘There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is the Force.’ Attachments, family, and love were forbidden. Emotion was forbidden. There was no room for failure, yet failure was their legacy.” There was a darkness in his eyes, the past still cast a shadow over them, but there was a brightness that had bloomed from within. There was hope. “Instead we could follow a more balanced Jedi code. Emotion, yet peace. Ignorance, yet knowledge. Passion, yet serenity. Chaos, yet harmony. Death, yet the Force.”

“Emotion, yet peace. Ben, it’s perfect,” she whispered. It was everything they had come to understand since the Force had bonded them together. Luke had shown her that dichotomy on Ahch-To—had explained that balance. It was only then that she could see it in their bond, that she saw the differences between them as complements, two halves of one whole.

“We can encourage healthy attachments and channeling emotions rather than suppressing them,” he continued, turning to her with that spark of intense conviction she had witnessed in him since the moment they first met. He was a passionate man; he focused all of his energy into the beliefs he held, and she was grateful that she could finally stand by them. “We can teach them everything, even telekinesis, helping them find their strengths. We can help them find their own path in the Force. Darkness has its place in combat…with enough discipline to manipulate it. If a Jedi doesn’t feel conflicted between betraying a code or betraying their true self, they will be less likely to be seduced by what darkness can offer.”

Her excitement built as she imagined the great purpose they could have in the universe. “Would we return to Ahch-To? Yavin IV? Find our own temple?”
Ben shook his head. His words made it clear that he had been considering this longer than the past few days. “We can find an abandoned Rebel base that has enough room for students and their families. We will ensure that we never take children away from their families again. We can teach the parents about the Force, too, so they understand their children better. And we’ll take in orphans, of course, giving them a place to belong.”

“And if they can’t travel to the base, we can teach them over holos,” she added. “As our Grey Jedi Order grows, the older students could help teach the younger ones. We can spread our knowledge through them to the Core Worlds. We can make a greater impact than any politician ever could. We can keep balance in the Force and change the galaxy with our story.”

Ben stared at her, his eyes bright with love, purpose, and hope. This—this was the man he was destined to be. This was the man she had flown to the Supremacy to save. “We can do it.”

She smiled, remembering her dream. “We will do it.”

“Perhaps it will be enough to save the little Reys of the galaxy—”

“And the Ben Solos...”

“Definitely the Ben Solos,” he chuckled. She leaned over and kissed him tenderly. The shadow of the past would never fade completely, but perhaps that was a good thing; perhaps it would inspire everything they did to change the galaxy for the better. As dark as the past had been, their future looked bright. “In the meantime,” he said, “we have taken the Triellus Trade Route as far north as we can. If we go much farther, we’ll be off the map. We’re somewhere over Cantonica, and I was thinking maybe we could hop on the Hydian Way. I thought we could stop in Bespin, pick up supplies, then spend some time in the rebuilding systems before we head south to Chandrila for the wedding?”

Rey laughed, feeling weightless, content. This was life with Ben, her Ben. Wherever the Force took them, whatever destiny was in store for them, they would face it together.

“Then after, we can do whatever you want to do, see whatever you want to see, go wherever you want to go,” he murmured. “You know I will give you whatever you want.”

“I have what I want,” she smiled. “It’s just us now.” It didn’t matter where they went, as long as
they experienced it together. There were thousands of worlds to be explored, but Rey thought it would be nice to see her friends and Bespin again.

As if reading her mind, Ben shifted in the copilot’s seat next to her, and they set to work in companionable silence, preparing the *Millennium Falcon* for hyperspace. She felt a warming sense of peace envelope her; it was both familiar yet foreign. Foreign, not because she had never experienced it, but because it was not her own…and it originated from a once-hollow place in her mind. Rey's focus snapped to Ben at the realization, and he glanced up from the controls, grinning knowingly, his eyes telling her everything she needed to know. Her smile widened as they worked in unity to launch the *Falcon* into the stars.

On the planet of Cantonica, a young, Force-sensitive stable boy named Temiri Blagg existed in a world he didn't belong to. Broom in hand, he stared up at the same bright stars as he imagined a world far away from his master's cruel hand. Playing with the ring on his finger, he wondered about the fight beyond the bright lights, fancy clothes, and fake smiles of Canto Bite. He thought about the symbol on that ring, the symbol that he had been told stood for love and freedom and hope.

He wanted Oniho to finish his story. What had happened to the rebels fighting under the symbol on his ring? Were they up there somewhere? Were there others like *him*? The thought left him feeling less alone.

What happened to Jedi Master Luke Skywalker and the people he fought to save? What happened to the Resistance and the First Order? What happened to Rey; did she become a Jedi? Did Kylo Ren fall? One day, he thought, one day he would find out. One day he would join the fight to stand up for what was right. *He* would stand beside heroes like the legendary Luke Skywalker.

A bright light shot across his field of vision in the dark sky, and for reasons he couldn't explain, he was filled with hope—hope that somewhere out there was a destiny, a belonging, like he had always imagined. Something inside him, something that had always been there, told him that ship carried the key to his escape from his life there. All he had to do was wait. He was good at waiting.
The End

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