PREY

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PREY

by KagamiSorciere

Summary

Kylo Ren, recovering, retrained, and bolstered by the Dark Side thanks to Snoke, is still obsessed with his failures and the scavenger that got away. Carving a furious path through the First Order fleet and throwing everything to hell, he hones in almost desperately on her location as she runs from his whispers until there is nothing left but them.
Snow [prologue]

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Ben…..Ben…no…KYLO…GET OUT!

As the planet collapsed around them, he watched her run.

"R…Rey…!"

He reached out a hand to grasp her as she fled but it was no good. She bounded through the snowy forest like she'd always belonged to it, despite the desert within her, and his injuries prevented him from any kind of pursuit.

He rolled over onto his stomach, and he began to crawl. As if knowing he was there, he watched as the land broke away on either side of him but never beneath him. Yes, it knows…it knows how important I am!

He growled deep in his throat, gripping the ice-encased grass as he pulled himself along. Gods, the heat. It wouldn't stay frozen for long. Breathing heavily, he glanced behind him, wondering offhandedly almost if someone would actually come for him, and even thought he saw lights. Lights of…the Millennium Falcon? No. The blood loss must've been playing tricks on him. Why would that ship, that ship, ever come for him? His father was dead. No, Han Solo was dead. He'd seen to that.

He laughed. A quiet chuckle at first, but as the idea of his dead father became more and more real to him, and the idea of his own hopelessness opened up more and more before him, the laugh became louder and louder. Soon, he was nearly doubled over in laughter, wheezing, coughing from the pain, as the collapsing planet upon which he laid threatened to fall out from under him, when three search lights focused on his form.

He felt himself pulled onto the medical trundle. He felt more than heard Hux's words rail down at him. He doesn't matter…it doesn't….. He tried to pull himself up but felt hands firmly press him back down. Hands at his shoulders, hands at his arms, hands at his sides, hands at his face. His face stung. Realizing there was a wound there made it sting quite terribly all the sudden, and he felt a moan well up into his throat. He saw Hux's stupid face swim over him momentarily, and then all was dark.

Chapter End Notes

So, this is super short, because I was nursing a hangover, and as I was writing the next section I got a horrendous stabbing pain in my eye and literally could not continue. Chapter 2 is a proper chapter, so please do check it out. Yes this is a trash ship- all aboard!!!
In his mind, he saw it. FN-2187 had been nothing. Pounding at the wound given to him by— no, he couldn't think about that right now— he quickly dispatched the traitor with a slice up his spine. The lightsaber had been there, then, just within his grasp. He could see it….His lightsaber…and as he called to it, it had trembled, but the girl…it had gone to the girl instead.

"Rey…"

Fury seemed like a poor adjective. He stood there, blood dripping as if in humble sacrifice, and it had answered her, not him. 'You cannot betray me, too…' But as they danced in that clearing in the forest, he with as much skill as he could squeeze out of his condition and she like a poker-wielding simpleton, watched as before his eyes this simpleton seemed to gain skill with the ancient weapon with every second that passed. It was truly insane. When he’d pursued her in the forest, he’d felt it then, the garbled chaos of a mind unknowingly drowning in the Force, and her almost tangible fear as he closed in had sullied her shots and made her easy to subdue. Since then, she’d flexed her claws with the Force, and whether she knew it or not, she was flexing them again now. It was rare, so rare…he’d been inside her head. He’d felt the pulse of her life, the drastic extent of her loneliness. But things like that could sometimes be a two-way street.

'Don't be afraid, I feel it, too…'

She'd taken advantage, exploited a moment of empathy they'd shared, and used it to throw it back in his face.

Yes, it was rare. To be as such, and then to have that strength in the Force….he took his chance.

'You need a teacher!'

She looked almost shocked. Insulted?

'I can show you the ways of the Force.'

Her face had calmed. No, this was not advantageous.

In her focus, she'd found renewed strength, swinging blow after blow, she'd given up trying to stab him, until she landed a hit, and another, and another…his very being seethed over his wounds but his mind was on fire watching her mind at work behind such steeled eyes. A moment, a distraction…. "Is she….stronger than me?"

That was all it took. Intuiting the opening, she'd taken it, slashing at him, and it was over. He laid there, bleeding in the snow, looking up at her as her face melted back to normal and she ran.

"Rey…!"

He jolted awake, moved to sit up, but it was impossible. Panic started to set in. Why couldn't he move? He cracked an eye and saw the padded straps holding him to the med pallet. In their infinite foresight, the med staff had decided to strap him down, either to prevent him from causing further injury to himself or to prevent him causing injury to them. Inwardly he smirked. He didn't have it in him to carry through with the smirk outwardly.
Stilling himself, he let his eyes roll back as his lids flickered closed. Tightening his fists, he felt the pull of his wounds as the straps slithered out of their buckles and freed their prisoner. Gingerly pushing the restraints away, a voiced called out over an intercom.

"Lord Ren, we strongly advise you to take your rest. The webbing over your wounds has not had enough time to properly adhere."

There was a pop as the voice ceased. Kylo swung his feet off of the pallet and, bracing himself, turned his head to look in the direction of the two-way glass, courteously backlit to allow him to see the silhouette inside. He turned away again, eyes locked firmly on the floor. He licked at a cut on his lip.

"How long has it been?" he asked quietly. He felt the hesitation in the med worker. There was a pop again as the intercom key was pressed. A pause.

"Roughly eleven-point-three hours." pop.

He growled, his eyes hovering over a specific speck in the floor. Tension, his feelings told him. The worker was anticipating his reaction. But the worker was safe in their little box. This time he did smirk.

'It'll always be like this….but this is what you wanted. To be feared…..to be left alone.

Compatriots were good for one thing- achieving a purpose. After that, why keep them around? Camaraderie? What purpose did that serve?

Weakness. People are weakness. And that is why they all have to die.

The muscles in his arms tensed as he slid himself down to the floor. pop.

"My Lord?"

He snapped his head in the direction of the coward in the box. He felt their mind go blank before forming the words, 'Well I tried.'

Kylo's lip arched. "No you didn't," he replied aloud, and watched from the corner of his eye as the figure backed away in fear and promptly exited the box.

He shuffled across the floor and pressed a panel on the wall. A sink pushed forward and the area above it blended into a mirror. Without looking up, he washed his hands.

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General Hux looked down at his wrist as a message flashed across the screen. 'He is awake, and he has left for his quarters.'

He huffed and pursed his lips. Exasperation was too good to waste on the likes of Kylo. He turned on his heel. "Officer of the Deck!" he called in clipped tones. Suddenly a woman in a slightly less dapper uniform was at his elbow standing at attention. He looked her over. "I leave charge of command to you. Inform me immediately when we enter planetary orbit."

"Yes, sir!" she enunciated, clicking her heels together throwing herself rigidly into position. He nodded and walked briskly for the doors, hands folded behind him.

When he arrived at Kylo's quarters, he found the man in fresh attire, attentively examining his face
with gloved hands in a mirror. His old, battered gear lay strewn across the floor. Hux arched a brow before clearing his throat to look at him. Kylo continued to inspect the mesh that covered his face wound, unmoved.

"I see you are in one piece," the general began. Silence. Hux's cheek twitched in annoyance. He glanced again at the mess on the floor and as his eyes wandered back to the man he had to work with, he caught sight of a battered shining at Kylo's waist. Hanging from his belt, as if utterly normal, was a lightsaber cut cleanly at the handle in a neat diagonal. Only one of its handguard blade emitters remained.

"And I see they managed to destroy your toy," he smirked.

Kylo paused. Lowering his hands, he turned and faced Hux, his features devoid of expression. Hux's head tilted back, and he swallowed hard despite himself.

"Not destroyed," the Ren said evenly. "Merely scarred." He paused. He turned back towards the mirror and raised a hand to trace the edge of the webbing adhering to his face. "It is fitting.....perhaps."

Hux's brow flickered. "They say you're lucky to be alive. Whatever that Wookie hit you with should have killed you."

Kylo paused again and, gripping the edges of the counter in front of him, his mouth began twitching. Hux could hear the creaking of leather as his counterpart held the piece of furniture in a vice.

"No," he said.

"No?" Hux responded by reflex, snapping back to attention.

By the door, a lighted alarm beeped loudly. Hux's brows slightly knit together as he looked at Kylo, half waiting for him to finish and half wondering if he would answer the call. Seeing that neither was going to happen, he turned away and answered it himself.

"Yes, what is it?"

A pause. Hux swore he heard a stifled snicker coming from Kylo's direction.

"General Hux, sir, we've just entered orbit."

Hux nodded despite no one there to see. "Very good. Prepare my ship."

"Yes, sir!"

He stood in front of the intercom for a moment before turning to Kylo.

"I don't appreciate you picking at the minds of people coming to report to me. It isn't conducive to efficient operations," he said with a frown.

The corner of Kylo's face turned up in a slight smile. "Then train them to be less weak," he retorted and, grabbing his helmet, he forced the door switch open and walked confidently out of his quarters, leaving Hux behind.

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Stormtroopers lined the path that led to the temple Supreme Leader Snoke resided in, a mix of
Snoke's own reserve and their escort. As General Hux deplaned to quickly gather a routine report of the perimeter, a helmeted Kylo evenly glided down the gangplank, conscious of not twisting his torso more than was necessary. His arms and the singes on his legs, he concluded, would rapidly heal, but his abdomen…it would take time. The thought alone was enough to make him do something that would undoubtedly double his healing time, but none the less, as he neared the bottom, his gloved fingers brushed against his broken lightsaber. Subtly, as if purely procedure, the stormtroopers within twenty feet of him backed slowly away in unison. His steps slowed and, with a twitch of his lip no one could see, he moved his hand away and walked quickly down the path despite every ache in his body. The bubble of space followed him as he made his way to the entrance of the temple.

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"You are on your feet, despite medic orders. This is well," Snoke's voice echoed through the chamber. Despite residing within the structure, he never actually showed himself. Only Kylo Ren had ever actually laid eyes on the Master of Ren, something Hux rather resented. As soon as his thoughts turned in that direction, though, he cleared his mind entirely.

Kylo bowed his head and Hux watched as he tried to bow the rest of him as well. "It is by dint of your training that I survive, Supreme Leader."

Hux pressed his lips together, determined not to think anything.

The towering image of Snoke nodded. "Indeed. And when you have completed your training, not even a scratch will you abide."

Kylo's fist tightened. "Even with the wounds," he continued, voice distorted into low tones by his helmet, "I chased them. Killed one of them—" Snoke cut him off with a hollow laugh.

"Yes, it seems you indulged a bit. But your failures will not recur. Not once you have fully stepped into the Knighthood of the Ren," he wheezed out.

Inside his helmet, Kylo bit at the scab on his bottom lip, bit at it until he could taste blood, and stifled a snarl. Snoke turned to General Hux and Hux immediately stiffened to attention. Kylo hated him.

"And you, General…"

The general raised his chin, looking straight ahead of himself.

"…what have you to say for yourself?"

The image in the chair wrapped its fingers around its stony seat.

"Supreme Leader," Hux began. Kylo rolled his eyes from inside the safety of his guise. "if it were not for the necessity of exhaust ports for everything we build," he said, the volume rising in his voice as his frustration played out in the form of him spitting out his words, "we would have no weakness, no means by which anyone could infiltrate our structures!"

Snoke laughed again. This wasn't looking good for either of them. "Well then, General. I would recommend a turn of innovation. Recruit whoever you need to ensure that this petulant, incessant problem does not recur."

From the corner of his eye, Hux could see Kylo stiffen and he steeled his expression, making sure to leave at least his eyes reflecting his determination to succeed as he saluted his leader.
"Understood!"

Anticipating his dismissal, Hux turned to leave them to it, when he felt a pull at his back. "No, you are not dismissed yet, General."

Hux paused and casually turned on his heel to see Snoke's outstretched hand reaching for him. "Kylo Ren," he continued. "You may leave."

Kylo started forward and a twinge of pain shocked his side. "Master—"

Snoke's eyes flared and he shook his head. "You will leave. And you will prepare yourself for tomorrow. Your wounds are of no consequence."

Kylo seemed frozen.

"Go," the voice echoed back at him.

There was a pause, and then he turned to leave, his robes billowing out defiantly behind him. The door crashed shut in his wake.

Hux turned forward again, unable to hide his trepidation at being left alone with their leader. In silence, he bowed.

"General, I have some information to share with you that I cannot yet tell our young Ren."

Inwardly, Hux was amused, but half hated himself for the lapse in professionalism.

"Don't get too excited," Snoke said, leaning back in his seat. Hux reflexively cleared his throat, maintaining the depth of his bow.

"It would seem FN-2187 did not perish," he informed him. "And the girl has utterly vanished."

Hux felt his jaw slacken. "Does this mean—?"

Snoke leaned to one side. "It is very likely she has made contact with Skywalker, and he is shielding her."

The general stood upright and looked almost pleadingly at the image. "Supreme Leader, if I had known she was—"

Snoke waved his hand. "I did not tell you. How were you to know."

Hux's jaw clenched. I should have known!

Snoke's expression changed into what Hux could only assume was a smile as he rested his hand back upon the rock.

"Regardless," the voice echoed. "These are not things to tell your counterpart yet. When I have finished his training, then he may act as he sees fit."

Hux pressed his hands to his sides. "Yes, Supreme Leader."

With a lazy flourish, he was dismissed.

Chapter End Notes
So after a bit of personal recovery, some exposition, but I don't plan on this taking too long. Thanks for reading!!
Silence.

In an offshoot room of the temple, where only the Knights of Ren were permitted to enter, he sat, tunic flung against a wall, perfectly still, perfectly in silence.

But his mind….his mind would not stay silent.

His closed eyes quivered as the past few battles flashed in front of him. His confrontations, her look of horror as he ran Han Solo through.

His eyes burst open, meditation broken, and his hand instantly went to his severed weapon. A careless brush of his fingers caused an unexpected stab of pain and he gasped, yanking his whole arm away. Holding his hand high up to a dusty shaft of light filtering in through one of the several holes scattered in the walls, he watched as a small bead of blood welled up on the pad of his fourth finger. Instinctively he sucked on it, and scowled into a particularly dark corner of the chamber.

No matter what he did, no matter how deep into his analyzation he would go, her face would always bubble to the surface. It ruined everything.

Biting at the minuscule wound on his finger now, his throat let loose a shriek, violent, into the shadows and the dust, shaking his entire form with it. It was short, a moment quickly gone, and as he hunched over breathlessly he looked down at his hand. He'd made the cut worse. He sucked at it again aggressively and turned himself against the light streaming from the walls. His back muscles rippled, ironically warmed by the solar radiation he half-heartedly tried to avoid. As he stared ahead, his breathing became more audible, and his hand gingerly found its way to his side. He clenched his teeth. Looking down, he examined the wide spread of mesh covering nearly half his torso and laid his palm flat against it. For a moment, if he closed his eyes, he could feel his father's hand brush against his cheek.

Suddenly, he flung out his legs in front of him, and in a fit of rage stomped his foot so hard into the ancient stone floor it cracked it, in turn sending a sharp pain through the very center of him that radiated out of the blasted wound in his side. He cried out, and his voice bounced off the walls as he doubled over, rolling down to the floor as he tried to grip his torso but couldn't even touch it for the pain. The cool of the rock sent a different kind of shock through him, and his eyes widened as the tears welled up and began to fall, treacherously, from the corners of his eyes, and he wailed into the silence.

Normal…normal now, these fits, he thought through it all. He writhed on the floor, willing himself to cease this behavior. He breathed deeply, trying to choke out the cries, and instead of the weak emotion that threatened to escape from his throat, he screamed instead. He half wondered if, during the course of his half a dozen or so screams- he'd lost count- if anyone could actually hear. But he didn't care. Let them hear.

Let them fear. It's so easy for them to flee in terror from what they don't understand. Like rats.

The image, suddenly, of Hux and all his precious 'men' as a puss-sullied scramble of ginormous rats caused one of his screams to be replaced with a half-strangled laugh. It was enough. Enough to
pull himself together with.

Kylo didn't make it a habit to walk half naked in front of other members of the Order, but as he pulled himself off the floor, cautious not to strain his wounds further, he grabbed up his things, and left, in plain view, back up to the ship.

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The ground troops had alerted the landing party, and the landing party in turn alerted the star cruiser above.

Kylo Ren was returning to the ship.

But while this courteous forewarning had become the norm since all had learned to prepare themselves for his coming in case of one of his sudden outbursts, the tone was different this time. Kylo, they reported, was not himself. As much as he had been anything defined as 'himself', which was never much more than a collection of outbursts and entitlement.

The stormtroopers inside and outside the Temple of Ren had been the first to give notice. One of them had even risked speaking to Kylo, offering to assist in whatever situation there was. The soldier was waved away without a word. Kylo remained silent. And covered in flecks of debris like he'd been pushed and rolled haphazardly down a forest mountain. That, and while it wasn't necessarily uncommon for him to forego his helmet, he'd never been in such a state of undress before. Or rather, not that anyone could remember, or dared to remember, if it had ever happened.

The landing party felt obliged to report back their observations to the ground troops who had so accommodatingly warned them of Kylo's impending presence, and soon every member of staff was, in hushed whispers, sharing what they knew about the state of one of their leaders.

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At the break of dawn on the planet, Kylo arrived in the apprentice chamber in his least restricting garments, sans helmet. After the day before, he'd been able to center himself despite never solving in his mind the cause of his recent failures. Instead, he just pushed it all aside. Finishing his training was paramount in his priorities now- the rest of them, all of them, could go to hell until then.

He closed his eyes and reached out with his feelings, careful to stay away from some and only extend those which were pure objectivity, and felt the walls of the hall, the perimeter of the building, the very line of the forest outside itself.

"Kylo Ren," came a crackling but unusually tangible voice. When he opened his eyes, he saw standing before him the slender figure of Supreme Leader Snoke, in the flesh.

"Why did you give me that name?" he asked, face utterly blank. He watched as Snoke made something akin to a grin.

"My Knight, names have their own peculiarities. And when you came to me, you wanted power over one man. So, I gave you the gift of 'Kylo'- the inversion of that name 'Luke' with which you gird your hate so passionately."

He shifted his jaw slightly. He'd already known this answer, but like everything, he knew such things went both ways. If his leader was still not intent on telling him why he put him at such a disadvantage by tying him so close to Skywalker, it wasn't worth pressing further.
"Disadvantage?" Snoke exclaimed, easily piercing his young apprentice's mind. "Disadvantage only if you cannot shield yourself from him. Which you will have no concern about doing after we begin today."

He gave a grudging nod. Snoke stepped forward.

"Ahh, but my disciple..." the hooded leader purred. "Your wounds still cause you some discomfort."

He stiffened himself. "No, Master."

"Oh?" queried Snoke, circling him now. "Because the walls," he said, motioning above him casually, "tell me a different story."

Kylo flinched. So, someone had heard. He glared up at the ceiling but pressed his eyes shut again quickly, determined to cling to his composure.

Snoke stood behind him now, and Kylo remembered his first meeting with his future Master.

"Aren't you a wild and suspicious child!" the spectre in the wastes had exclaimed.

Ben, no more than 14, glared as the vision circled around him, determined to never let his back show to it. He would never give it an easy opening.

"If you truly wish to become my disciple and do away with your uncle's cult, you must show your devotion....and your trust."

Ben glared at him, clenching his fists, but seemed to go over it in his mind. "How so?" he asked simply.

"By staying put when I speak to you..." it began, and started to circle around him as if to test if its instruction had really sunk in. Ben, against all instinct to never put his back to such an overwhelming abyss of Darkness, held his ground. It was just as brave, he concluded, to put your back to it and still feel confident in one's ability to defeat it, despite the less than advantageous position on the battlefield. He blinked as he thought this. Uncle's words. He scowled.

"Yes," the thing whispered hoarsely behind him, "But soon you will hear my words."

Ben froze, but realized he'd really let down his guard.

"Well done," it praised.

Kylo closed his eyes. "It seems it will take time," he replied finally.

He heard the rustle of fabric as he felt Snoke shake his head.

"Oh, my future Scion....I will teach you....I will show you all you need to know to squeeze every last weakness from your very pores."

As he said this, Kylo felt as long, knobby fingers reached around his side and a chill overcame him so intense that he had no time to react. It covered his side, the entirety of his deceitful wound, and he felt as if it had been frozen closed. Ice had become his flesh, the Dark Side of the Force imbuing
him with a healing he had no idea was possible.

"...and because you didn't even fathom the possibility that this power could exist is why you will not leave here until your training is complete," Snoke whispered in his ear. Kylo shuddered, finally able to feel himself again.

"Now begin!" The Master cried shrilly, and he pushed the Ren violently away from him.

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. Please forgive the delay in updates. I'm back at work and it's stupidly time-consuming. I hate it, but I like the paycheck. I've been hard at work on the outline for this story, though. 19 SOLID pages of outline for this piece is finished and I still have the last leg yet to do. The last leg...it's the hardest part. So, thanks for reading and for your patience- I appreciate all you guys.
Consoles rang across the deck.

"I need a report and I need it now!" bellowed General Hux as he watched in abject rage as yet another wave of Resistance X-wings rumbled past his cruiser windows.

It had been a week and a half since he'd been issued the assignment from the Supreme Leader. Upon learning of a series of possible locations for a Resistance base allegedly housing FN-2187 and escaped prisoner Poe Dameron, along with other important Resistance leaders, he'd been ordered to go and investigate, and if it proved true, annihilate. While a simple enough task in words, the Resistance had stepped up their game in the aftermath of the destruction of Starkiller Base, and they'd smacked right into layer after layer of defensive strategies just to get within range of each potential candidate. So far, every time had proved to be a decoy. Hux had decided it was getting out of hand.

"REPORT!" he screamed, face turning purple as an officer finally approached him with information.

"Sir! Scans report no inhabited structures on the planet, sir," the officer said. The Resistance ships flew by again, this time managing to land enough hits to rattle his command station.

Hux bared his teeth at the underling, and in a fit of anger, smashed a gloved fist into the read-out panel in front of him, narrowly missing the controls. The whole deck stopped, and all eyes turned towards Hux. Breathing heavily through clenched teeth, he pulled back his hand from the mildly dented metal and looked around him. His mind warred between accepting that he'd really just committed such an outburst and not understanding at all why work had ceased when they were under attack. As if reading his mind, within a beat they were instantly back to it, and the officer stood sweating, waiting for Hux's orders.

He inhaled deeply. "Pull out the destroyers. Have the fighters finish them off as much as they can before they run. Again. And once they've cleared out, immediately set course for the next location on the list."

The officer nodded vigorously. "Yessir!"

Hux tugged down the bottom of his tunic as he watched him scurry off and quickly regained his composure. Yes, this was definitely getting out of hand. He despised himself for thinking it, but without Kylo Ren on the front lines, their attack lacked the brutal punch that had previously knocked fear into those they faced and the lives out of anyone still around to fight them. Only the threat of Snoke kept the two leaders on tenuously cordial terms, but Kylo had been gone nearly two weeks. 'Two weeks!' he yelled again in his head, and yet he was left alone to chase after Resistance decoys while Kylo got to play the part of the once and ancient knight. No, he'd seen the power of the Force. He knew it was real. What he didn't buy into was the pomp and self-righteousness of the cults surrounding it. Such organizations lacked true discipline, he thought. They lacked the regimental attitude and inherent understanding of duty that was so clean and obvious in the ranks of the military. He'd concluded long ago that even on the off-chance the Force ever actually had anything to do with him, he'd want no part of it.
He sniffed, fingering the edges of his sleeve cuff as he watched the ship pull out of the battle and into a less tedious direction. No, he didn't mind fighting for the Ren- a fight was a fight, and a war always needs soldiers- and it wasn't as if he didn't believe in what they were striving for: a return of Empire, and the golden days of Peace By Domination. But when it came to the parts of the First Order that intersected with the Knights of Ren, he preferred to leave that to Kylo, who had been conspicuously absent from duty for several days right when they needed him to play his part. It was bad enough he could barely stand his looming presence when he was here.

Hux could feel the bile rising in him again. There was nothing more they needed him for. He turned and left the deck, burning his gaze into the few who dared to watch him leave.

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Sweat poured off Kylo Ren as he forced his body to endure shock after mental shock while holding himself aloft on a stone he raised in mid air using the Force. For any other being, he was convinced, it would have been 'too much', but every time that phrase entered into his mind he banished it as quickly as it came. For days his mind had no longer been his own, his thoughts shoved around by his Master to be rearranged and pushed aside to make room for new ones. He was constantly bombarded with images and ideas, mental scenarios he ran that were so realistic the shock of finding out they actually weren't when they were over was enough to significantly rattle him. The thoughts were mostly imposed upon him by Snoke, but some, he realized, flowed to him naturally from the Force. 'Terrifying' was the cheapest word to describe it- so much of what he thought he knew, what he believed, especially about the Knights of Ren, were at odds with what he had previously known, and he swore at odds with what Supreme Leader Snoke had even told him in the past. Snoke said kill all, put all under the heel of the boot, but the Force said examine all, and then act. Ancient scenes sometimes paraded before his eyes of knights- Jedi?- adhering to such beliefs, before all was shoved out of the way for more of his Master's tutelage. Snoke, it seemed, had a harder time listening in on his malleable subject during these sessions- the din so loud in Kylo's mind that it didn't seem worth it. Kylo used these moments, when the trials didn't threaten to peel open the inside of his skull, to think as freely as possible about everything he'd been learning and seeing. And hearing.

Sometimes, he discovered, he could push back at the images. Sometimes, he could direct them to show what he wanted to see, such as glimpses of grand battle stations not long for this world, of the Old Republic, of an exotic queen with no name…in fact, out of all the images, this one he found himself coming back to the most. She fascinated him, with her elaborate hair and her small features. Sometimes, when he noticed a lull, he would look for her again, and every time she appeared she was different and rich. Occasionally, though, Snoke would notice the change in focus, and he would feel a violent shove and harsh words telling him to 'play later'. Did he think this was a game to him? Was any of this just for fun?

Kylo didn't have time to seethe. He couldn't spare the brain power. It was too much to retain let alone analyze. Soon, he found himself seated on solid rock.

"Well done, my young Ren..." Snoke rasped, a bit shaken as well from the effort it took him to pass on what he knew- what he felt Kylo especially should know- during their lesson.

Despite his deathly fatigue, Kylo stood up, and did his best to look composed. This is part of the training, too, he thought, even if it isn't meant to be. The desire to rest is just another weakness.

Snoke seemed to hobble more than glide over to where his apprentice was. "You may sit, if you desire," he offered. Kylo shook his head.

"No. I will stand," he replied flatly, and worked to hold himself more properly upright. Snoke's
mouth twitched slightly upward.

"Then for your efforts, I reward you with a short detour," the leader said. Kylo looked at him. "I have a task for you."

"A task?"

"General Hux….requires your presence."

Kylo's immediate impulse was to scoff, loudly, but instead, here, he chose not to. Snoke's demeanor changed again.

"Yes… I think you will do well, and you have earned the opportunity to test your new knowledge and skills for the greatness of the First Order," he concluded. Kylo lowered his head, still somewhat reeling from his practice moments ago as he listened.

"Ordinarily I wouldn't allow it, but… You are to leave the temple," Snoke said, chippering up. "and assist in the search for the Resistance base. It would seem they have left an assortment of false trails. Perhaps your insight could be of use in narrowing down the… candidates," he said smugly. "And to finally lead them to victory."

Kylo's head rose. "'Lead'?” he asked uncertainly.

"Yes," said his master. Snoke drew near to him. "As you were always meant to do."

He frowned as he listened. "But I thought—"

Snoke closed his eyes. "—that your service had not been good enough?" He stared pointedly now at the Ren. "You have succeeded in more ways than you realize. Perhaps, now that your training is verging on completion, you will begin to see the weave of it all….you have served impeccably, Kylo Ren. And once you have completed this small task, you will come directly back to me."

Kylo's face was a subtle mix of awe and alarm. "…And Hux?"

Snoke grimaced out a smile. "Hux has his part to play. Now, it is time you took up yours."

"Forget the past few weeks," he called to his apprentice as he headed towards an opening door. "And focus on what must be done now."

Kylo watched as the stone slid shut behind his master, his mind blank. Forget? His one major disappointment had been that his new training had yet to reveal to him how exactly his most recent failures had come to pass. Snoke's words of praise washed over him again- 'You have served impeccably'. Kylo gritted his teeth and, slowly, lifted one extremely strained and heavy foot after another to get to his chamber in preparation to leave.

—

He was back, in full armor. With his training on hold, his mind was beginning to uncloud, and he wanted nothing more than to get to work, analyze the situation, and solve it. He felt he had new space now, and his trip on the transport gave him time to settle his mind and prepare himself for people again, and General Hux.

As the ship landed and the ramp lowered, he squared his shoulders and walked smoothly down to the concourse. To his shock, however, there was nobody there to greet him. No troop rally. Not even a squadron. As he looked around himself, more out of a disbelief than a necessity, a small
huddle of stormtroopers jogged their way towards them.

"Report," he said immediately, calmly, voice compressed by his helmet.

"Welcome back aboard," one of them said.

XT-113 his mind seemed to say. This...is your welcome party.

"We're here to be your escort up to the main deck, sir," he continued.

Kylo blinked inside of his helmet and took a deep breath. "Proceed," he said with a nod.

As they made their way through the ship, he noticed as men and women seemed to run everywhere. After sensing from several passing individuals that they'd just suffered yet another attack- one in a long string of them as they flit from decoy location to decoy location in pursuit of the Resistance- he realized things were not as he left them. This ship was in chaos. As his small contingent finally made their way to the main deck, the doors smoothly hissed open to reveal a very lively but organized command. Silently, he approved. At least not everything's gone to hell.

A brief look around as the stormtroopers saluted and departed back out the doors allowed him to quickly find Hux. In silence, he stared. The lackluster greeting in the hanger had irked him, although he could now see why giving him the deference he was due was probably impractical. He watched in silence as Hux issued a few more orders before turning to step from his perch. Taking the few steps down, the two men spotted each other and Hux paused as Kylo girded himself for the encounter, but, tightlipped, Hux merely glared at him and departed.

Kylo, hidden beneath his helmet, could feel his lip twitch. His patience was beginning to run out but, looking around the command, he tried to recall his training, and the face of that small woman who actually seemed to bring him a sense of peace. Deciding he had been there enough, he turned and departed for his usual quarters.

—

Stepping into his rooms, where normally he would have immediately removed his helmet, after his last bout of training with Snoke, he was disinclined to do so. Instead, he took inventory of his things brought aboard as he was before finally finding himself with nothing to do. As his eyes swept across the room, they halted on a small cabinet, locked with not only a combination but a bio scan. He held it steady in his gaze for a moment, before making up his mind and going over.

Kneeling down, he punched in the code and removed his glove to stick his thumb over the sensor. He felt a sharp sting as the needle punched through his skin, taking a tiny drop of blood with it as he heard the locks click in retreat from the door, and he tugged it open. Inside lay the melted mask of Darth Vader.

"Grandfather..." the modulated voice murmured. He looked at it for awhile, and an odd sensation washed over him. For some reason, this mask, the presence of his long dead role-model, seemed so, so far away. Hesitantly, reverently, he brought up his ungloved hand and brushed his fingertips along its contours, and suddenly a wave of images washed over him- a man with sandy blond hair, the dark side, and a woman...the same woman he'd seen in his training. She smiled up at him.

Jerking his hand away, he was shocked. What did she have to do with—

A loud buzz at his door caused him to quickly jerk away and, slamming the small compartment shut, he rose to his feet. He could hear the locks and tumblers resetting themselves as he replaced his glove and answered the comm.
"What." he said absently.

"Sir, I was told to inform you that we will soon be approaching another candidate system," the voice told him. Kylo paused.

"And?"

He could feel the tension seeping through the other end. "That was all, sir." After a moment, he could hear the connection sever. What was Hux playing at?

Hitting the control for the door, he bounded down the hall and immediately reached out for him with the force. He knew immediately that Hux could feel his probing. He didn't care. He soon found him in a guard room discussing shield tech as he entered, all eyes but Hux's suddenly on him. Slowly, the general turned around.

"Kylo Ren," the man said, voice dripping with mock enthusiasm. "How generous for you to finally join us! I'm sure you'll see," he said, waving casually around himself with a twisted smile on his face, "That we are progressing beautifully and do not require your assistance." Hux's smile morphed into a curl of his lip. "You may return to your quarters," he dismissed, and turned back to the stormtroopers he was speaking to.

Kylo could feel his muscles tensing as his hand slowly flexed and unflexed into a fist. "All of you get out," he said quietly. The troopers paused, looked at Hux, looked at Kylo, and eagerly but tactfully abandoned their post to safely exit the room. Hux closed his eyes, bracing himself against the control panel as Kylo shut the door.

"What is this?" he said quietly, desperate to hold onto the calm he so carefully cultivated the past two weeks.

"What is what?"

Hux replied.

"You know what I'm talking about," said the even, modulated voice.

Hux turned around, badly disguising a laugh. "I'm sorry, were you displeased with your arrival party? Did it not live up to your stature? Please- we are at war. But I guess you've not been here to notice that."

"No," he replied simply. Hux just stared at him, livid.

"Because while you were gone, off being some mythical acolyte," he began, closing the space between them as the color rose in his cheeks, "I have been up here, trying to repair the damage you caused, when you allowed a simple droid and a slip of a girl escape your almighty grasp!" he shouted. Hux was shaking, days of pent up anger and frustration over their failures finally coming to the fore as he had the perfect punching bag to lay into. He knew it was dangerous, but part of him wanted to see Kylo Ren throw one of his infamous fits. He wanted to see him slash to pieces the guard station. Because maybe if he did, it would continue to perpetuate the status of 'monster' Hux held of him in his mind and then, with that out of the way, maybe they could finally make some progress. Instead, much to his shock, Kylo just stood there in silence, staring at him.

"What?" Hux said quietly. "No witty retort?' he began, shaking his head. "No yelling or screaming or-or destroying everything in sight on even the slightest provocation?" he said, his voice rising again as he backed away from him.

"Well," he continued. "Maybe the Supreme Leader's training has finally paid off. Maybe you're finally able to join the rest of us in completing our mission and in actually being told things without
concern for your temper," he sneered.

Kylo, listening to all this in a silent rage, suddenly cocked his head to the side. "...'told things'?

The corner of Hux's mouth quirked and soon found himself allowing a short laugh. "You still don't know?" he said incredulously, amusement clearly in his eyes.

Kylo felt his pulse quicken as he listened, and his blood boiled at still having to look at this man's face. "Know...what." he gritted out. It took everything in him to keep his composure. *Something is wrong,* he thought.

Getting a reign on his mirth, Hux worked to compose himself without losing his grin as he folded his arms in front of himself. "Know that everything you did, everything you suffered, *burned for,* was for *nothing,*" he finally spit out, his face resuming its usual bitter expression. Inside his mask, Kylo's face contorted.

"That every injury, every *scar,*" he said pointedly. Kylo flinched. "is nothing but a testament to your *failure.* FN-2187 is *alive,* Kylo Ren, and your playingth, the *scavenger,* is already long with Luke Skywalker!"

Instantly Hux was in his grasp, his fingers clenching around his throat as he squeezed and roared. *He lied to me. The Supreme Leader lied.* He gripped Hux harder and lifted him off of his feet as the general's face began to turn purple. *I was supposed to lead!* he thought, and flung Hux hard against the booth's controls. Marching up to him, he grabbed him by his coiffed hair and slammed his head down again on the sharp knobs and buttons. *I was supposed to lead this army to victory. This was my destiny, my mission- my responsibility!*

Kylo screamed again as he grabbed a now badly cut and bleeding Hux by his uniform and flung him across the other side of the booth. He stood in the middle of the small space and he shrieked- all the rage and failure and pain and loss and betrayal building up inside of him letting loose in this one, violent cry. He didn't notice that behind him, Hux had dragged himself across the console and, fumbling, finally managed to hit the panic button. The door whooshed open and Kylo spun around to see the previous group of stormtroopers waiting outside. They saw their general, severely wounded, sprawled across the controls, and a seething, hulking Kylo Ren in the middle of it all.

"GET HIM!" Hux screamed, and the stormtroopers, loyal first to their general despite the creature they had all learned to fear for the past several months, charged towards the room. He felt for his lightsaber, and was momentarily shocked to feel its new, broken form at his side. Thinking quickly, he raised his hand, knocking back the small group with the force causing them to bowl over each other, and stepped out of the room. He called one of the men's blasters towards him and briskly headed down the corridor.

About halfway down, an alarm was sounded. As a set of stormtroopers intersected him in the hall and fired, Kylo knew what it meant. The entire base was on alert to get him.

His mind swam.

Suddenly, none of it made any sense. He raised the blaster and shot them with two clean shots, never stopping as he continued his pace through the ship. How was FN-2187 still alive? More and more troopers tried to confront him, and his bodycount steadily rose. And Rey... He had to get off the ship. Making a sharp turn, he bounded down a service corridor that ended in a ladder and, simply jumping the distance down, heard his feet clatter in landing as he arrived in the docking bay. He paused, pressing his back against the wall and, preparing himself, turned to meet two battalions of stormtroopers guarding the bay. He quickly, strategically, fired at the communications
booth before facing the throng before him. He used every tool he had: ricocheting pulse fire with the force, spraying them with the blaster, and knocking them away with a sweep of his powers when he could. He had never been more angry over his broken lightsaber until that moment, and he cursed the girl who had slashed at it.

Rey...

Repelling another wave of fire, she suddenly filled his thoughts. How had he forgotten? She'd been everything he’d thought about until...SNOKE. Within his helmet, he growled. He hated this. He hated everyone. He hated his father for making him face him, and hated him even more for bringing her to him. He screamed, whipping the back of his hand through the air as a whole line of troopers flew away twenty feet into the air as he shot at one stray soldier behind him. Docked was an Admiral Tie Fighter. Yes. He would take it.

It had been awhile since he had ever piloted a craft, he contemplated as he climbed in, and he looked over his shoulder and saw as the remaining living troopers tried to roll themselves painfully over to finish the confrontation. The last time he’d ever flown was when he was Ben Solo. Could Kylo Ren fly this craft now? Flipping a few switches, he felt the ship come to life. Hitting the exhaust release, he pulled the craft into the air and pushed it forward. He accelerated towards the end of the runway, and just as he reached the end, he saw as one blast fire skirted past him, and he plunged off the edge. He pushed hard, diving beneath the star destroyer, and doubling back as he aimed for the cannons. Programming for a string of hits quickly, he fired, and could feel the confusion emanating from the ship's crew as apparently one of their own began firing at them. His sensors detected the other guns coming online and he turned to make one final sweep to blast one last gun before calculating for light speed and, he was gone.

—

Kylo jumped to light speed, and he jumped and he jumped and he jumped. He went all directions. He was eager, no, desperate, that they should never find him. His aim was, ultimately, the outer rim territories. Maybe it was an obvious choice, but either way it still mad him harder to find. After his ninth jump, and nearly out of fuel, he began scanning for planets. One that came up on his radar was a lone planet in a dying system. While the ship he'd hijacked was, he later realized, the model gem of the First Order fleet, its readings were not all-seeing. Even so, he detected but a single outpost, a trading spot, and decided it was as good as anywhere to stop and refuel.

After landing on the surface, he found the planet to be little more than a glorified wasteland. Not quite a desert, but more like an expanse, with sporadic flora that shot up from the cracked surface like twisted spires too scared to go very high.

Not like Jakku, he thought.

It was nothing for him, after removing his helmet, to manipulate the locals into giving him what he wanted at no cost to himself. He was conscious of the fact that he face yielded better results than the mask did, and their minds, he discovered, were simple, and very weak. He watched as they happily fed him and took care of his ship, even offered him shelter. Apparently, they told him, nights on this planet were perilous. While nothing in his scans had indicated anything living on the parched rock but the occupants of the outpost, he didn't bother arguing with their superstition. Why try to correct and teach them anything when their ignorance only benefited him?

As the star for that system sank low against the horizon, he walked over to his ship to examine it. Singed here and there from narrowly missed fire, it had no other problems. It would serve him well. But take him where? He rested his hand on its curved wing and looked at the massive, dying binary star as it burned cool and large into the twilight, and for a moment, he allowed himself to
close his eyes.

_Rey…_

He called out to her, reaching for her with the force. But there was nothing.

He tried again, and this time, he tried to picture her face. The first image that came to mind was when he was interrogating her. She had looked at him, terrified. "No," he murmured, knitting his brows, and he shook the image away. Next, they were in the forests of Takadona. He had held her in thrall, captured at last, the horror on her face at her inability to move, and he could feel his smugness from back then at showing her what she had never thought possible before. He frowned again. "No." Now, they were in the snow. Starkiller Base. She had spurned his offer to her, and he could feel even now the heat off of their crossed weapons as he watched her face find a stillness that he could only ever imagine. A stillness that would never belong to him. And as her eyes lit up, she had rebounded towards him, hacking and slashing, with the eyes of a feral creature.

_There._

He felt it. Just for a moment, a twinge, something that tugged at him from far away.

_Rey._

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he'd swear he could hear her gasp. His eyes flew open and his hand gripped his ship. It was there. Something.

He could find her.

His eyes darted across the quickly blackening expanse as he heard his hosts calling him to come quickly inside. He could find her, though. _Had_ to find her. _But what about the First Order?_ He shoved his head against his outstretched arm and squeezed his eyes shut. How many lies had they paraded in front of him? How much had the tiptoeing been more about keeping things from him rather than trusting him with the command he was promised? His eyes flared open. _I'll do it myself. I'll find her. And I'll bring her back._

Shoving himself away from his ship, he turned, and quickly headed inside the shelter, a local quickly scurrying in to shut the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

_Hey guys. Here's chapter four. The outline for this story is ultimately completed- now all I have to do is do it justice. The outline alone is 37 solid pages of text. Thanks for reading, and wish me luck!!_
The past several weeks had been a blur to Rey. In the blink of an eye, her entire life had been tilted over, nearly upside down, but finally things had started to feel calm again. It had been nearly a month since she arrived on Master Luke's planet and the tiny island he called his exile, surrounded by a blue ocean that still took her breath away every time she laid her eyes on it. She would never get used to this much water, she decided. Even in her imagination, it had never seemed this…

"Rey?"

She looked up, looped hair bobbing around her, as she set eyes on Luke. Luke Skywalker. He smiled down at her kindly as he watched her finish her breakfast. Although he didn't have much to offer in way of variety, she never seemed to mind. He knew from her stories the life she'd led before the Resistance swept her up, and he was grateful that what he had to offer didn't seem too paltry in her eyes.

Rey smiled in return and soaked up the remainder of the stew with her last bite of brown bread before popping it into her mouth and rising to her feet. The breeze coming off of the vast ocean felt good blowing through her hair and she felt at peace.

Luke grinned. "You seem to have found your center, Rey."

She beamed broadly. "I think so, Master," she agreed, picking up the last of the bread crumbs on her plate with her thumb, never forgetting them, and held the plate at her side.

"Wash up, and we'll begin the day," he said, resting a hand on her arm, and she hopped down the ancient rock steps to clean up from her meal.

When she stepped out again, Luke was in the clearing, the largest, flattest spot on their little island, waiting for her. They stood in front of each other in silence, and Rey closed her eyes, reaching out to him, feeling at the edges of his mind. Luke's mind was an enigma. She'd made the long trek back to the Resistance base once since she'd committed herself to his tutelage and when she, on his encouragement, tested out her abilities gently on those around her, they were so much easier, clearer, than him. While their minds had been a straight precipice to cross over into, Luke's was like a constantly shifting shoreline, not unlike the waves lapping at his island, and every time she tried to take a step towards it, it would shift and move again to avoid her footfalls. It was doing it again now until, just so, she felt herself get a grab at one of the moving edges and pulled it to her. She could feel him smile.

"We're sparring today, Master?" she said with a grin, pleased with herself as she opened her eyes.

He smiled back with a nod. "Yes. You're getting better at this, Rey. Much more quickly than I admit I anticipated," he said with mock concern.

Rey could feel herself swell with pride. She'd always been good at being a scavenger. She felt she was good at a lot of things. But no one had ever praised her for any of it until she came here, and she rather liked it. It was nice being acknowledged.

"But careful you don't let it get to you," he warned, feeling her thoughts.
Rey gave a tight, timid smile. "Sorry, Master."

"No need," he said with a gentle shake of his head. "I realize what a change this is for you. I wasn't too unlike yourself, even if I had someone to take care of me. The desert….it raises you despite whatever you start with."

His eyes glazed over with the memories of his childhood and Rey could feel her eyes water slightly. *No crying*, she felt her mind automatically say, and instantly the emotion was suppressed. Even surrounded by all this water, she couldn't bring herself to waste it- especially not on anything as useless as tears.

The sparring begun. Pulling out their sabers they started with choreographed sequences, but the longer they stayed at it, it became more spontaneous, more real. There was always the care not to make any contact, but at the same time, Rey found herself leaping out of his range more and more frequently. She was already covered in a thin sheen of sweat- he wasn't letting up on her today. Every now and then, he would stop the fight, offer critiques, and Rey would come at him again, applying the instruction, and Luke's face betrayed his feelings as he gave her pleased little smiles. Although he had left it all after the destruction of his school, as he trained Rey he admitted that he really did miss teaching. When a student was this good, he missed it especially.

"That's enough for today," he finally said, raising a hand. Rey was drenched, and Luke had already shed a few layers of robes, both to fend off the heat of the activity and to make it easier for him to move. He called back his blade and Rey did the same.

"Lunch," he called to her across the space. "And then meditation. You've done spectacularly today, Rey."

Rey huffed, catching her breath, but smiled widely and gave a small bow as she went inside the main dwelling of the island and prepared something to eat. Things were going so well. *I think I'll have the tiny ocean crawls today*, she thought to herself, and leaned over the small water-filled basin where the gray swimming creatures with the hard tails milled around and, after heating up a pot, grabbed a handful, said a few small words of thanks Master Luke had taught her for the life she knew she was taking to sustain her own, and gently dropped them in. Rey had never thought about where her food had come from before. She assumed all food came packaged and water-activated like her rations on Jakku, although in the back of her mind she could swear she remembered something hot and savory from long ago that most definitely *didn't* come from vacuum-sealed plastic.

She watched the pot boil and observed as the little crawls turned from gray to bright red and she knew they were done. Using a tool to fish them out again, she poured a bit of oil on a plate, peeled back the shells, and dipped them in, taking a bite. They were salty like the ocean and good. Sitting down on a nearby cushion, she scarfed them down, cleaned up, and stepped back outside to take in the waters around her. Master Luke was gone- off doing whatever he did while she was meditating- and she threw her arms above her head and stretched. Heading back up to the high point she had occupied that morning, and every morning, she found her favorite spot, turned her face towards the sun, and let the wind caress her face as she closed her eyes.

She was so at peace, so full of the Light today, that she subsumed almost immediately. She felt herself melt into the island which melted into the ocean which melted into the planet which melted into the *universe*, and she reveled in it. A thrill ran through her at this union with the Light, and she felt it embrace her as her spirit soared. She stayed like this for several minutes, several hours?, when at the edges of her awareness she felt a deep rumble. She frowned. *Not the island*. And in her Force form, she turned in the direction of it, and she squinted.
Red. Rey felt herself pull back as the Light curled around her. Why did she see the feeling of a pang of red? Should she go towards it? She paused, contemplating, too timid to investigate. She felt the Force, she was the Force, and she didn't want anything to take her away from the feeling she felt right now. But it had been so strong. As she contemplated, she heard an echo, but she couldn't make it out. Shaking her head, she put her back to it, as the echo came again. Her floating form closed its eyes. No, she whispered. But it came again, and this time: REY!

The voice was booming, slicing a path through the very aura of the Force itself to reach her, carving straight through her Light, straight through her peace. She gasped and her physical eyes flared open. It was pitch black, night, around her, and she heard feet bounding up the crumbling rock towards her. She twisted around, overtaken by mild panic, and Master Luke sped to her with a torch.

"Rey!" he called. His voice was so much more grounded and concerned than what had just flung itself at her, and this time, her eyes did water and tears did fall.

"Master," she whispered.

Luke stood before her, sorrow heavy in his eyes. I know, he said gently in her mind.

Chapter End Notes

So Chapter 4 had a lot of typos in it and I'm REALLY sorry (I'll fix them at some point). I was actually developing a rather nasty eye problem at the time and was in tons of pain as I wrote that chapter and never did look over it again afterwards. Although I'm still dealing with said problem, things are a bit better now, so apologies for the delay and thanks for reading- your comments on chapter 4 are literally what got me through the hospital visit the morning after posting, haha. I love you guys. :)

PS: This chapter is short. I'm really sorry. It was the only logical place to end this bit, though. More will come soon- I promise. I also changed the description again. For some reason I'm having a REALLY hard time writing a description for this piece. Oh, and if you're interested and you do the Tumblr thing, you can find me at http://these-are-the-first-steps.tumblr.com/
Rey looked up at him, panic at the edge of her eyes, as Luke came forward and knelt before her.

"Do you…" he began. Rey stared, hanging on his every word, and he swallowed hard. "Do you understand who that was?"

Rey pressed her lips tight together. She hesitated. "It was Kylo Ren, wasn't it?" she choked out.

Slowly, Luke nodded. Rey let out a sob, pressing the back of her hand to her mouth. It wasn't fair. Everything had been going so well for her since the destruction of Starkiller Base. Even though she knew she'd have to face him again some day, she didn't think it'd be this soon and that she'd be this unready.

"Rey…" he said softly.

"But how?"

"I don't know."

His answer was fast. Too fast. But Rey was already in too much of a state to think about it. In the back of her mind, she could still feel it, the echo of her name in his voice, and a slight tug there that terrified her. She gasped.

"Master. Do you think….do you think he actually knows where I am?" she asked, horrified.

Luke's eyes were stricken, and he peered at her carefully. "Why would you say that?"

Rey lifted a hand and seemed to bat away something invisible behind her head as her eyes searched the ground. "I feel…it's like something's pulling at me. Like a long piece of twine. I…"

As she struggled to describe it, his eyes grew increasingly concerned. Fear flashed across his face and he lifted his eyes to the sky above. There was no real intelligent life on this planet, just a few native creatures, and so the stars shone above like the bright balls of fire and molten gases that they were. He also scanned for anything that could betray itself as a ship moving high above their sky. When he looked back at Rey, he found her staring at him in silence, her face composed once more.

He frowned. "What is it, Rey?"

Her face was blank, desperate to hide her emotions. "I have to leave, don't I?"

"No, of course not," he tried to say comfortingly. He sighed.

He shifted over to sit next to her, knees bent and his arms propped casually over them, and together they looked up at the stars.

"Just because you felt him call to you," he began softly, "doesn't mean he knows where you are."

Rey hung her head down and squeezed her eyes shut. She wished so hard that that were true, but the tugging at the back of her mind told her otherwise and it terrified her. Suddenly, she felt Luke's presence brushing against her mind, and she opened her eyes.
His face was stern as he turned towards her. "Let me look," he offered. "Let me see this pull you're talking about. Maybe...I know I've spent the past several years looking for old scrolls and databases, for every piece of Jedi text I can find, but it doesn't make me all-knowing. And I feel like I'm letting you down not being able to tell you right away what's going on. Master Yoda could have told you. Probably Obi Wan as well. But me..."

Luke sighed painfully and ran his hand down through his short beard. "It's difficult being the last of something, to have your training half-finished and even then it's not what a Jedi would have had in the days of the Republic."

Rey listened carefully to him, but squinted at some of the words he used. Some of them were familiar, like Yoda, but some she only had tiny ideas of, like 'the Republic'- a thing that had seemed ancient and vague on a planet like Jakku. History wasn't exactly a thing you concerned yourself with when surviving today was the name of the game. Still, she'd heard stories, knew the general concept of what it was, but beyond that...

Luke tried hard to smile at her now and repeated his offer. "Let me look."

Rey could feel the anxiety rising in her. What if Luke still couldn't tell what it was? Or what if he could? Did she really want to know how weak her mind was that Kylo Ren could skim through the force like a rock across water to seek her out? Against her better judgement, she found herself turning towards him and resting her hands on crossed legs. She winced.

"I'm ready."

Sternly, Luke nodded, and he raised his hand. Suddenly, Rey's mind was open wide. Of course she hadn't put up any barriers against her teacher- she did want his help. But she didn't expect everything to be that readily available to him. She flickered an eyebrow as he passed through her memories.

"I remember you told me about your experiences with him," he said, going back to the fight in the snow: Rey's every attack parried as he bat her saber away, never attacking, only pushing. As Luke watched it play out before him, he frowned curiously.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing. I'm going back farther."

He saw her frozen on Takodana, Kylo Ren pacing around her as she struggled to move, and he watched as his masked face leaned in close. Luke smirked. We'll work on that next, if you like, he said into her thoughts. He sounded amused.

He pushed on, and flinched. Rey was in a contraption- its intent to torture clear- but found himself surprised as he watched Kylo Ren remove his mask at her harsh words and smirk. Luke raised his brows, and as he looked on, he saw him move closer to her, the look of anguish on her face as he forced her to relive her painful memories, and— THERE.

"Stop," Luke said aloud. The moment replayed itself, and he watched as both Rey and Kylo's expressions changed and felt the memory of something pass between them. The tug.

Luke let the memory go and Rey took in a breath, trying to shake off the memory of the concoction of fear and curiosity and anger from that moment, and she felt Luke just hover in her mind in the now.

"Oh..." he whispered. "Rey..."
She could feel him there but didn't, couldn't, see what he was looking at. "What?" she asked weakly. She felt the sting of tears at her eyes again.

"I don't know how…I'm so sorry."

"What is it?" she insisted, sniffing back her emotions.

"Don't you feel it?"

Rey focused, no longer a passive entity in this mind probe but an active participant, and her breath caught in her throat when she felt it.

"It…it's the same?" She meant it as a statement but the words somehow tumbled out as a question as Luke pulled back, her mind hers once more.

"I've read of this before," he said in a low voice. Rey's mind was buzzing as her heart pumped furiously.

"Two people whose energies can cross and link on to each other," he said, and she could hear the teacher in him taking over. "More often it happens between padawans and their masters. A sort of bond. But in other instances…"

His eyes drifted to Rey and she was beginning to resent whatever emotion it was that he kept casting in her direction. "Sometimes the Force pulls people together across vast distances as well."

"What are you saying?" she asked, her voice hardening as she narrowed her eyes at him. The ambiguity was finally starting to drive her mad.

"I'm saying you're linked. Bonded. Somehow. And whether he knows it or not, that is how you heard him call out to you, however far away he is."

Rey felt herself edging back slowly away from her master, disgust and horror mingling for dominance on her face as he continued.

"That twinge you felt," he said, ignoring her movement. "It was the thing connecting you, I imagine. And if what I've read is correct, there is no way really to sever it. No reasonable way outside of death."

"Then I kill him," Rey spat quickly, automatically. Luke looked on sadly but it just fueled her rising anger more.

"Kylo Ren's powers are great, and even if you did manage to kill him, the bond could pull you with him."

"What?" she gasped. "You mean…" she stuttered. "I-I could die if I kill him or if he dies?" Rey's vision started to cloud over. This was too much. She didn't ask for this. She didn't even know what was going on.

Luke shook his head. "That's only if the bond is very great, and even then it's just a possibility. Mostly, it seems, there's just a...huge hole, for lack of a better word, that is left there from where the person used to be. Usually."

"Is that...are we...?"

"No."
Rey let go of a massive sigh she hadn't known she was holding in.

"Not at the moment. From what I can tell. But if you use the link, nurture the bond...then it's a possibility."

Rey scoffed. "Well there's no way in Kahena I'm ever doing that!" and she laughed despite herself.

Luke smiled. "You're coming to terms with it. Good."

She looked at him and instantly scowled. He rose to his feet.

"Come," he said. "Sleep, and in the morning, I'll show you how he confined you in the forest, and how best to get out of it."

Rey looked up at him, her mouth twisted in annoyance. "What about Kylo Ren?"

Luke's brow flickered. "Well he's not beating down our door yet. There is time."

He extended his hand and she took it, rising to her feet and dusting herself off. They said their goodnights, and Rey watched as he descended down the hill to the main dwelling before turning towards her smaller one a little ways away.

As she ducked inside, she took a moment to lean against part of the rock that made up her dwelling wall and sighed. It seemed unreal. Maybe it was unreal, but as she closed her eyes, she could feel it there, the twine, and she quickly shook her head to rid herself of it. Tomorrow she would finally learn what he did to her on Takodana, and she would learn it for herself. That thought brought a twisted smile to her face as she splashed water on herself and scrubbed her arms and legs with an ocean sponge. Taking out a half loaf of bread from a makeshift shelf, she tore off a few pieces and stuffed them into her mouth before putting it back and flopping onto her sleeping pallet. She pulled the Resistance standard issue blanket up over her shoulders and willed herself to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Urgh, more stupid mistakes in the previous chapter- they've since been fixed. Anyway, thoughts so far? He's finally getting closer, but she doesn't seem to really want to run...yet.
Kylo stood on the fifth minorly populated planet he'd encountered and looked out over the low, swampy terrain and he pulled. He closed his eyes in focus.

After that first initial thread he felt leading him in her direction, he'd held onto it, memorized it, and that first night as he slept he found himself dreaming desperate that it shouldn't slip away. He'd woken up covered in a sweat, hardly taking notice of the food the hosts he'd manipulated into taking care of him had set before him. Even in his sleep he seemed to search for it, search for her, and now, in these flat swamps, just as he did in the wastes, he reached out, wound the connection around himself, and let it guide him.

For some reason, it seemed to be getting harder to seek her out. He frowned through his concentration, sweat beading on his brow despite the low solar radiation the planet naturally received. When he felt the direction reveal itself again, he breathed in and let go, taking in steady gulps of the heavy, moist air as he leaned a shoulder against his ship. This was exhausting, but he was getting closer. He knew she hadn't moved.

Kylo's lip curled at the thought. Could she really not feel him? Could she not feel every time he reached for her in the Force, as the thread between them grew taught every time he tried to align her with his next direction? He couldn't believe she was this weak. Something else had to be going on.

"...your plaything, the scavenger, is already long with Luke Skywalker!"

Hux's words rang back into his ears and his face contorted. Pushing his gloved hands through his hair, he gave a shrill yell, slamming his boot into the wing of his Admiral Tie Fighter over and over until his voice became cracked and hoarse from the scream. His arms shut over his head and he slumped down against the ship, his knees almost smacking into his face as he huddled in the mud.

Of course it had to be Skywalker's doing. Of course he had to be keeping Rey from him. He breathed heavily into his lap as he tugged lightly at his hair. She wouldn't run from him because she has Skywalker, and he only has himself. He thought quickly about what his odds were against the two of them, trying to wrack his mind about where she might be in his training compared to his own time with his once-uncle and ultimately came up short. It would be different for an adult. It would be different because it would be Rey.

His mind filled with her again- how close he'd been to her prone form in the interrogation room, how nearly he had touched her face in the forest, choosing instead to ghost his hand over her features...he cursed himself now for not taking his chances and indulging himself while he could. He could feel the slight pull of her at the back of his mind as he remembered. She wouldn't run now that he was alone, except...

He pulled his face up and stared eagerly beyond the dim lights of the misty planet, lips resting on his knees as he thought. She doesn't know I'm alone.

He grinned against the fabric of his trousers. He could definitely use that to his advantage. But could he pull it off? Half of him argued that he should just call in the First Order, explain himself, and hope they see reason and give him a battalion. But he knew- they'd never see reason. Not after
what he did to Hux. He sighed.

*No. I'll capture her myself. Bring her back kicking and screaming myself. I don't need Hux's army. I want for nothing.*

He unfolded and rose quickly to his feet, his hand reaching out reflexively to grasp at the wing of his ship as the heavier-than-normal gravity caused his brain to swim from the fast motion, but in a moment he was back aboard and searching. His computer pinged and he had the next planet in his sights.

—

Rey did her best to train. Master Luke had shown her how Kylo Ren had held her that day in the forest, spell-bound and locked in position, but no matter how hard he tried to pin her, it just wasn't the same. Luke seemed ruffled, but at the same time acquiesced.

"Our powers lie in what we're most comfortable with doing. If Kylo Ren uses this move often, then he has surely mastered it. I don't use it, so it's still a soft art for me."

Rey had frowned.

"Still," he continued, "It doesn't mean we can't understand the underlying principle of it, and find a way out of the hold."

And so it had been. They would train like normal, and periodically throughout the day, Rey would discover her foot cemented to the ground or her hand frozen in some position in space, and she would have to find her way out of it. The first time it happened it had taken her five excruciating hours to break free, causing her to completely miss lunch, but once she had slipped out of the hold the first time, it became much easier. As Master Luke's grip got tighter the more he practiced the ability on her, she in turn got more clever at getting out of it. It wasn't dissimilar to freeing one's foot caught deep within the sand under the waters of the surrounding ocean- know that you will break free, give it a little twist, and there you are.

But at least once a day things would come grinding to a halt as the back of her head would grow hot and she would hear his voice loudly in her head.

—

Quiet planets to restock resources on were coming fewer and farther between. In order to prevent a complete bottoming out of his fuel levels, he'd already had to land on one questionable world and blast his way onto it just to get what he needed. He'd finally left again with a minor scratch against his cheek and a more substantial blaster graze along his left leg. He channeled the pain once he was back in hyperspace, however, flying free before reaching for the ship's med kit and applying a thin layer of bacta to the abrasions. He hissed at the contact it made with the burnt flesh of his leg and somewhere in his mind he mourned over the hole ripped through his pants.
Feeling he'd gone far enough without checking his course, he pulled out of hyperspace and channeled in to another uneventful system. He didn't need anything this time- he just wanted to rest. He hadn't slept since three planets ago, and how long was that?

As he skimmed the planet's surface, it appeared to be mostly savannah with the occasional liquid mass to break things up, and he soon found himself landing at a small but busy trading post. His ship was now the worse for wear, covered in dust and grime from multiple planets and the mess that finds its way into tiny crevices in space. It looked old now, almost like a vintage Empire fighter, and he no longer worried about it catching the interest of some enterprising thief. Even so, he gave it a sheen of something repellant with the force and shoved his way into the busy parlor of an inn.

He tried not to roll his eyes in his exhaustion as it always went the same way.

"What do you want?"

"You'll give me a room," he commanded lazily.

"It'll be 50 currency for a night. No bath."

"It will cost me nothing, and you will give me the bath."

"But maybe for you, it'll be on the house, eh? But I can't give you the bath."

Kylo looked up, startled. His brow twitched.

"Bath."

"I really can't."

He huffed.

BATH! he screamed into the creature's head, slamming his hand onto the counter as it writhed behind the makeshift desk. Kylo's eyes flared, his matted hair framing the dark circles around his eyes as he shoved the thought onto this stubborn being.

"So ok, maybe…maybe a bath can be worked out, too, huh?"

Kylo watched, teeth gritted, as a key and a token were shoved in his direction. Not taking his wide eyes off of the stupid innkeeper, he snatched them up before turning away to find his accommodations.

He stalked up a rickety stair and eventually found the door. Jamming the key in, he felt the lock grind open from lack of oiling and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. It wasn't a large space, but it wasn't small either. Sitting at the back of the establishment, it was dark, and a single window allowed a view to the outside waste canister situated directly beneath his room. Kylo peered down and cringed. Still, taking advantage of his hard earned token, he used the ancient comm system to order up the bath.

They came more quickly than he anticipated, servants hefting gear into the room with them, and he soon found his skin prickling at the idea of submerging his skin in the hot water of the reasonably sized portable tub for the first time in days. As they finally began to exit, he started to peel off his robes when he noticed one female lingering behind, clutching a towel in her hands. He lowered his arms and looked towards her with a tired disinterest.
"Aren't you leaving?"

She cast down her eyes and bowed slightly. "I am here to bathe you, sir."

Inwardly he could feel himself screaming. "There's no need for that. You may go," he said in a level voice, but she bowed again.

"Sir, I cannot go while the bath is in progress. It is our rule. I am here to bathe you," she repeated, eyes still demure.

Kylo clenched his jaw and sighed.

"You will go and leave now, and not come back," he felt himself command her, but the command felt strange this time. She didn't move. Was it his worn-out state? He felt a bit woozy on his feet, but it had worked well enough moments before. All his questions vanished, however, when she seemed to bow and make for the door.

Finally, he thought to himself, when suddenly she turned and produced a small blaster from beneath the towel in her hands. Kylo cursed and, reaching for the gun strapped to his thigh, pulled it from the holster and shot her square in the chest. The weapon slipped from her hand and clattered to the floor as she fell over, blue liquid seeping into the filthy inn carpet as she bled out. He resisted the urge to spit and stalked over to her dying form.

"Who sent you?" he growled. Her glassy eyes stared up at him as she took in one shallow breath, and another. He turned away for a moment, desperate to control his anger, before turning back again, leaning over her.

"WHO SENT YOU?" he roared, and he brought up his booted foot to press heavily on the hole gaping from her chest. His bared his teeth and heard her choke back a sob.

"F...First...First Or..." Her eyelids fell hooded over her eyes and her muscles went limp. She was dead, and Kylo felt the Force seep out of her.

The mixture of exhaustion and utter fury so exasperated him that he couldn't make up his mind what reaction to have. He spun in place for several moments, grabbing at his head. The First Order, he echoed over and over in his mind, when he turned and spotted the steaming bath still waiting for him. A desperate sigh escaped his lips. He looked at it longingly, and then down to the body on the floor, still leaking vital fluids.

Sucking on his lower lip, he whimpered, pointed the gun at the dead woman, and shot her in the chest again, just for good measure, before leaning over to toss her blaster onto the bed and reholstering his own weapon. He grabbed the handle at one end of the portable tub and he pulled. His muscles groaned from misuse after days confined to a small spacecraft, and as the tub began to inch around and away from the window, some of the precious hot water sloshed over the side soaking the floor. It didn't matter. Once he felt it was sufficiently out of view, he stripped down to nothing, and, testing the waters briefly with his fingertips, Not dangerous he concluded, he climbed in.

The sensation that passed over him was startling as he felt the hot water penetrate him down to the bone, and he ducked under, scrubbing at his hair before grabbing a handful of the soft soap left behind and working that through as well. He scrubbed every inch of the grit off of him until finally, hair plastered in slight curls around his face, he leaned back and stared at the ceiling.

It was gross and stained, like everything else in this grungy hovel, and he found himself wondering
if it really was the only place he could have gone to. He rolled his head along his shoulders and looked back at the body on his hotel room floor. He twisted his lips and sighed. Shifting back to face the ceiling, he closed his eyes and felt the water lap slightly at his chest and felt for it, that thread, and tried to see where it pointed him.

The back of his head grew warm as he felt the tug, but this time he didn't say her name. He just held it for a moment, feeling it, and noticed this time small wisps of feelings that weren't his own emanating off of it. He frowned. Pulling harder, he felt fear, anxiety…annoyance. He smirked. As disjointed as the feelings were, he plucked them away. He wanted to look deeper, and he sensed the thread tighten under his scrutiny.

"Rey…" he felt himself whisper, so different from all the other times he'd shouted out her name, and suddenly she was there, the ghost of her essence that had been so familiar during their short encounters, and he inhaled deeply as he clung to it. She danced across his senses, something almost tangible, and he felt something coil inside of him until just as quickly as it had come, she was gone again.

His eyes opened wide as he let go his breath, sinking his arms against the walls of the tub and he let himself go limp. She had been so close, as if he could have reached through space itself and pulled her into this terrible room with him. He breathed hard. Taking in a deep gasp, he plunged under the cooling water.

—

Rey swam more than a lap around the island. She swam three. She swam because she liked it, and she swam out of spite that Kylo Ren constantly pulling at her mind could taint something she loved so dearly.

As the sun began to set, she climbed out and made her way to the small filtration system that turned their unlimited bounty of salt water into fresh water, and climbed into the stall, swimming shift and all, and turned on the spray. It was cold, and she worked quickly to scrub the salt and sea off of her skin with a hard piece of ration soap, and worked even harder to get it to lather into her hair. She scrubbed vigorously with her fingertips until all of her hair was piled and stuck neatly at the top of her head before pealing off her shift and wringing it under the water. She had had no idea just how destructive the salt and minerals in an ocean could be until she came here, and after losing one precious piece of clothing to her lack of attention she was determined not to lose another, but then that feeling over came her again and her hand was quickly clutching at the stall door. She breathed heavily, searching in her mind but this time there wasn't the pull, the yank, trying to seek her out, nor the bellow that often accompanied it.

"Rey…” the deep voice caressed against her mind and her eyes fell shut as a strange but not unpleasant feeling washed over her and she leaned against the door for support. She was warm suddenly, despite the cold water pouring down on her, and the heat of it made her shudder. He was there, somehow, quiet this time, but she could feel the edge his mind perilously teetered on, and as she felt him reach for her she slowly leaned in, until a cry escaped her lips as she yanked herself both physically and mentally back. Her skin bristled, tiny bumps covering every inch of her as she panted, wide-eyed, and the rush of the still running water was suddenly cold again. She reached out, grabbing and missing repeatedly for the shower handle before finally finding it and twisting it quickly off. Clutching her wet shift to her chest, she felt her breath quicken and run away without her as she sunk down to the floor, clamping her hand over her mouth. She stifled a sob, and then another.

What was that?! her mind screamed.
She cried, despite slowly freezing, not just out of fear that he had come so close, but because in that moment of warmth she almost, barely, fell into it.

Chapter End Notes

GUYS! Thank you so much for your kind comments, kudos, and readership. I read every comment eagerly and get a stupid grin on my face whenever I see another alert notice in my inbox. Things are heating up, though. Poor Rey is starting to squirm. And the First Order isn't sitting idly by as their boy goes AWOL. Oh my〜
The mirror was cloudy and old, but it was enough to help him peel back what was left of the medic webbing across his face to reveal a relatively thin, shining light pink scar running from his forehead, down the right side of his nose, and thickening a bit across his right cheek. He tried to withhold from having any opinion of it. He moved his face from side to side, trying to come to grips with the change, how the bottom end of it seemed to indent into the flesh of his cheek some, and hoped its appearance would maybe improve in time.

He sighed and looked down at his left side. The pain had still been so bad back at the temple, that is, until Snoke chose to take a personal interest. Taking a deep breath, he gingerly removed the webbing and had to suppress a gasp. This scar…it was very different from the one he felt across his face as his nose twitched. It wasn't the light color of healing flesh, it was dark, brown and almost black, and his mind flashed back to how it had felt like ice was coursing through him as Snoke held his hand over the wound. Carefully, he placed his palm over the mark, and felt that it was sold and whole. At the very least it was healed- a new decoration to match the dozens that already scoured his body.

He looked into the mirror one more time in silence before turning to look at the heap still on the floor next to his door. He scowled. The body was heavy but it was impractical to let it sit there. Grabbing the former threat by the front of her tunic, he lifted and pulled her over to the room's lone window, leaving a trail of blue fluid behind. With his free hand he pried it open and, looking down, quietly thanked the obstinate, stupid innkeeper for giving him what was before such an undesirable room. Below him the waste canister sat gaping invitingly. He pushed the window open enough to keep it so, and turning back to the body, used his other hand to grab her by the hair as he started to shove her out of the window. He heard as the body plummeted the short distance down, and as his eyes followed after it, gave a satisfied smirk when it landed squarely with a crunch into it below.

He slammed the window shut with a snarl and looked down at his hands. Maybe he should have bathed after he tossed the husk of the murderer out. As he scrubbed his hands in the cloudy left over bath water, he contemplated his options. Was it even safe trying to sleep here now? How quickly would they discover their dead employee in their dumpster? Was she even a real employee? Would someone else only come for him in his sleep?

The last question didn't bother him as much. He could reinforce the door, shift the bed out of sight of the window. His senses were attuned enough in the force that he could tell whenever someone occupied the same space as him, even in sleep. Being able to do that was a vital skill during his early days with the Order.

As he half-heartedly shoved at the bed to begin moving it into position, he realized just how tired he had become and decided to take his chances. Pushing the bed into a corner that shared the same wall as the window, and dragging the water-filled tub to block against the door, he drew the curtains and, finally, slumped down into the bed.

He didn't bother to remove the outer coverings. He didn't trust anything to be really clean anyway. But, grabbing a pillow, he nearly moaned as he stuffed his face into it.
"Rey…" he murmured groggily, and instantly fell asleep.

—

Rey laid curled up on her bed pallet, shivering. Her body on autopilot, she somehow made her way back to her dwelling despite her mind simultaneously trying to replay and also avoid the experience she’d just had. A small fire burned through a narrow flue, and as she curled herself around a blanket, she tried hard to stop her teeth from chattering and to still her mind.

She breathed in, and breathed out. She breathed in.

It was so heavy, this time, in the back of her mind. Heavy with him.

She breathed out, and frowned.

Before it had just been directionless shouting, calling out her name, but this time it had been so thoroughly him that had accompanied it, wrapping itself around her mind, that she had had to to clutch at the shower door just to stay on her feet.

She breathed in.

The shower had been freezing, but the warmth was like it had been draped over her, and then her name.

She breathed out, choking back a sob.

Her cheeks flushed. For the few seconds it had been on her, that warmth had been everything.

And it had come from him, she thought to herself, and she took in another breath.

The warmth had enfolded her, held her, as warm as the whisper of her name had been in his voice that made her both want to lean into it and run away. And she had run away.

She exhaled with a sigh, but that one seemingly positive thing was enough. The shivering was gone, and her exhausted mind slipped into sleep.

—

He had wandered through the woods of Starkiller Base looking for her, helmet gone, left on the access bridge spanning the oscillator, but as he called out her name, he could find no trace of her. Eventually, in a large clearing, he'd stopped, fallen to his knees, and let his eyes roll back into his head as he fell back, arms spread as he flopped into the snow. He stared up at the night sky, full of tiny pin pricks of fuel for this monster the First Order had created, and he sighed, watching the heat of his breath spiral up into the air as the snow fell down, gradually coating him where he lay.

Rey shivered as she stepped through the snow- whether it was from the cold or the fact that she was somehow back at that place, she didn't know. What she did know was that, in the clearing ahead of her, lying in a black sprawling heap against the white was Kylo Ren. Her boots crunched the snow beneath them as she got closer but he didn't move. Is this where she'd left him to die that day? Is this what she was reliving?

She looked up at the starry sky as she ran a hand against her arm looking for some semblance of warmth before looking down at the man on the ground, now covered in a light layer of snow. She frowned harder and, tentatively, craned out her neck to peer over at him. Her moves were hesitant, but as she inched forward more to hover over his head, his eyes suddenly flicked straight to her
She watched the sudden shock run through him, and instantly he was up and on his feet and he spun away from her, pacing quickly as he roughly brushed and beat the snow from his chest and his shoulders and from anywhere else he could find it. All Rey could see was that animal again in the woods, beating at his wounds before he faced them.

He stopped and his gaze caught on to hers. She swallowed hard.

"Is that what you think of me?" he asked, gloved hands slowly resuming to pat the snow away from his dark form.

"Think what?" she replied, and she tried to search her mind for where he might have gained access but came up frustratingly short.

"An animal. Or a monster?" his lip curled at that last word and she watched his shoulders relax as his head hung forward, finally satisfied that all the snow was gone.

"If you mean the last time we met on Starkiller Base—"

"No," he interrupted, eyes narrowing. His brow creased, and slowly he took a step towards her. "I mean just now."

Ray watched him warily, her grip tightening on her arm. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You think I'm an animal," he said dangerously. His pace never faltered and Rey tried hard to keep her ground.

"No?" she said, the fear in her voice making the statement come out more like a question and he halted.

"Oh." he said simply, and his face smoothed out free of expression almost instantly. He turned away.

Rey was shocked. What kind of person could go from such a specific emotion to nothing at all in a single second? It was horrifying.

_The same kind of person who learned that emotion will get you killed,_ she felt herself think. She thought? Rey gave a quick shake of her head, trying to clear it.

Rey thought the chill was less now, she would never get used to the cold though, and she stared curiously at the man who had resumed occupying himself with gazing up at the stars.

"Oh, Rey…" he said quietly. She stilled. "I wish I could get to you more quickly. This has gone on a lot longer than I anticipated, you know?"

Without taking his eyes away from the sky, he smirked. "I thought I’d have you in my ship headed back to the temple planet by now."

Rey stood there in mild horror as she listened to him give a low chuckle at his musings. "So that’s what you’re planning. You think you can find me and haul me back to your master?"

Suddenly, rage was flashing through her, and for all its weakness she was glad of it- of anything that could smother the fear and danger she was feeling- and she began to make her way over to where he stood through the ankle-deep snow.
Standing before him, he looked down at her, a strange look of ironic amusement plastered on his face. She seethed. "Of course it is," he said with a twist of his brow. He opened his mouth to continue but she interrupted.

"I cannot believe this. Why? You already lost. You lost the map. You lost… every fight," she struggled to get out. His gaze had become wary as he looked at her small, shivering form. "And then you keep pulling," she enunciated, shooing away the invisible thing that had taken up residence at the back of her head like it was tangible.

"But today…," she continued, trailing off to stop and look at him. Her eyes were angry, tired, and sad all at once. "Today when I was busy rinsing out the sea and you did nothing but say my name was the worst."

Rey watched as he became very, very still and his eyes grew wide.

"What?" he asked, his voice barely audible.

"I nearly fell," she said bitingly, trying to hold off the blush from the memory of that warmth draping over her.

Slowly, he took a step back. Rey's frown deepened. "What?" she asked this time.

Kylo lifted his hand and Rey gasped as she felt a push at her mind, riffling briefly through the events of her morning that day before just as quickly stopping. She heard him whimper as he stood several feet away from her, his face stricken.

"You're really here?" he half cried, brows knitting together. Rey just stared at him confused, shaking her head not knowing what to say.

"I'm…" she began. She stopped, and she thought. Looking up at the snow, ignoring his panting breaths some feet away, she watched as it fluttered down onto the ground between them. She frowned. "This is a dream, isn't it?"

Wordlessly he nodded, expression unchanged.

"Which means you," she began, slowly raising a finger. "You're just a figment of my imagination. Something I surely brought up to scream at after what happened today," she huffed. She squinted, peering at him.

Mouth slightly ajar, he slowly shook his head as he looked her in the eyes. "No, scavenger. I shouldn't be able to look into the mind of a figment, and this is my dream."

Rey gasped, and suddenly taking long strides he was upon her, fingers digging into her arms as he gripped her, pushing her back. She suppressed a scream as she tried to struggle but couldn't.

"Tell me where you are!" he roared, eyes burning down into hers, and her mind whirred, trying to process the revelation that had just smacked her in the face.

"Rey, tell me!" he cried, shaking her in his hands slightly as he heard her take in a sharp breath. His mind was racing. Here, here, I finally have her...

She looked up at him, still somewhat in shock but quickly coming to terms with the fact that somehow they were both sharing the same dreamspace. She tried to make sense of it, and the only thing her brain kept coming back to was the bond connecting them through the force.
She felt his grip slacken suddenly, and looked up to see pain flash through his eyes.

"Bond?" he whispered.

Rey gritted her teeth, the anger, and thus her focus, snapping back into place. "GET OUT OF MY HEAD!" she screamed, and throwing back both her hands, she pushed him squarely in the chest with all her might and he fell, backwards, and vanished.

Rey whirled around. "Where are you?!" she cried, spinning in place, searching desperately through the trees, looking around at the ground. But as her eyes traced along their footsteps in the snow, she saw that his ended just where she last saw him.

"Maybe he woke up…" she mused aloud and, relaxing suddenly at this thought, she looked up into the pristinely starry sky, at the snow fluttering down to collect on her shoulders, and she closed her eyes.

—

BANG BANG BANG

He was falling, she had the audacity to push him, and as he fell, all of his overly long limbs jerked out to catch himself and he blazed awake only to find himself on his dingy hotel bed.

BANG BANG BANG BANG

He gasped, head snapping to his hotel room door, as he heard the aggressive knocking and watched as whoever it was wrestled fruitlessly with the low-tech manual door opener. His eyes were instantly at his bathtub full of water and he let go of his breath. It was holding. The fools outside could wait.

"OPEN UP! LOCAL AUTHORITIES!"

"Shit," he hissed, jumping out of bed. He whipped around to find his boots and reholster his gun, and his body veritably buzzed from being interrupted from a much-needed sleep cycle.

They must have discovered the body.

Securing his things, he went back to the bed and flattened his back against the wall. He edged closer to the window overlooking the dumping place, and as he carefully pushed open the curtain, he looked to see the assassin spread out on the grass and being looked over by two individuals.

BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG

He growled and silently cursed again, glaring at the door before turning back to the window.

It seemed only those two were immediately nearby, and opposed to going out his hotel room door, two people were decidedly better odds than several. Ignoring the yelling and threats now being shouted through his room door, he edged closer to the window, pulled the force to him, and shot it towards the two investigators.

"What was that?" he heard one of them distantly say, and they both took off running around the other side of the building. Taking one final glance at the door, he saw as the tub budged slightly, and curling his fingers underneath the window frame, he lifted it as quietly and smoothly as possible. The assassin had been relatively small framed, and while he was long, at least he was slim.
He lowered himself out backwards and was soon hanging by his fingertips from the windowsill. Looking from side to side, and sensing no one coming, he dropped down squarely into the now empty waste canister with a loud *clang*. He hissed at the shock passing through his bones but ignored it, flinging his leg over the edge and launching himself out as he heard voices shouting closer.

He ran full tilt in the direction of his ship and smiled widely when he saw no guards posted. Whatever anti-theft sheen of the force he'd applied had also thrown off any of the local law keepers from recognizing it as his, and a thrill ran through him as he raised his hood around his head and bolted for the craft.

The second he was inside the controls flared to life, and he was gone before they'd even noticed. Breathing heavily, he felt a laugh well up from his throat, and he languished a bit in the adrenaline as he maneuvered his craft behind a nearby moon to give himself a moment to collect his thoughts. He laughed again, and suddenly his thoughts snapped back to Rey.

The dream. Not a dream. She'd *been* there.

He closed his eyes, swallowing hard, and leaned his head back against the Fighter's headrest. Like an idiot, though, he'd said too much. His face twisted. *No, it doesn't matter,* he concluded. The end result changed nothing—either way she knew he was coming for her. This he knew now.

*The Bond.*

His eyes flew open. No matter what he thought he let slip, it couldn't possibly compare to this. Did she really mean to suggest they were force bonded? He simultaneously felt panic and amusement flow through him. It really was too much. What was Luke feeding her?

*No. Impossible,* he concluded with a nervous smirk, and he gunned the ship into hyperspace.

Chapter End Notes

WELL WELL WELL. HOW THE TABLES HAVE TURNED. AHAHAHAHA!

No, but thank you guys so much for your kind comments. It really means a lot. And thanks for thinking this story deserves more attention. Seriously, if you like it, tell a friend. The more the merrier right? And you guys can find me on tumblr, too, at these-are-the-first-steps. Thanks for everything. :)
When Rey woke up before dawn, she contemplated sleeping in and never coming out again.

Her dwelling was dark and eerily still. A faint bit of smoke still rose out of the wispy remaining smolders of her fire and the dim gray of first, distant light vaguely illuminated her living space, but otherwise she could pretend it was still night. Rolling over and never waking up again seemed like the most sensible thing in the universe. If only it meant she could stay here forever and not have to face what she knew her day would inevitably bring.

Burying her face into her pillow, she sighed. Her knuckles shone white in the increasing light as she gripped the homespun fabric, and suddenly she launched herself up and was climbing out of her bed.

*I can't stay here.*

Standing in the middle of her dwelling, her hand covered her mouth and she choked back a sob. Why was it always like this? Why was it so impossible for her to have a place to call home.

But hadn't Jakku been home? *No, never,* she thought to herself. She'd spent, well, *years* on Jakku, but it had never been home. Maybe if she'd known how long she was going to be there it could have become home, but for Rey it was only ever a waypoint- even if that waypoint held her for nearly 15 years. She thought this time, though, now that she had friends and a purpose and people who cared about her, she could change all of that. But then…

Rey pressed her eyes shut as she repressed the urge to kick something violently.

She could have forgiven it, maybe- rationalized it as just part of what happened in these situations- if he didn't seem to be ruining everything so personally. But when she thought about it, it all made about as much sense as anything else that had happened to her in the past few months. Walking over to pull out a roughly stitched traveling sack, she began to pack.

—

His skin was buzzing. Even as he sat at the controls of his ship while it was on autopilot, he could feel the exhaustion hitting him in the head over and over again as he struggled to stay awake. It was no good flying through hyperspace asleep- not unless you wanted to wind up dead.

He'd gotten in four standard hours of sleep max, he figured, before the local enforcers had come breaking down his door, and it wasn't nearly enough.

Kylo felt that, given the opportunity, he could sleep for solar *days.*

The craft lurched as he crossed back into ordinary space. He was so far out now that he was no longer picky about what planet he stopped on- so long as he could get in and out without being noticed, and if he was very lucky, a win a less disgusting place to sleep.

This outer world's trading center was positively bustling. Kylo's exhaustion ramped up his anxiety, but not being able to deny his need to restock on sustenance and fuel, he pulled up his hood and made sure his ship was very well disguised with the force.
He let the swathe of fabric over his head engulf his features completely, leaving nothing for the light to expose as he made his way quickly and purposefully towards, what he felt, was the most honest vendor. The barter session was short, as they usually were when the force was involved, and he quickly procured and packed away what was perhaps more rations than he logically needed. The sparsity of inhabited planets was making him paranoid, however, and so to ensure the merchant was actually keen on giving him a sizable amount of goods, he'd actually given up currency to them to make their minds especially malleable.

The arrangements for fuel had been next, which had been easier. The creature in control of that had been dim-witted at best, clearly left to do the task because nobody else had any desire to do it, and a few kind words and push of his power was all it took to have the poor fool doing as he wished as well as direct him to the best establishment in town. He wasn't taking any chances this time.

When Luke made his way to the large clearing, as he did every morning, he was surprised to be confronted by a meditating Rey who sat quietly, legs crossed, in the center of the space. It wasn't like her, but then his eyes drifted down to the sack leaning against the jut of her knee. He frowned.

"Rey?" he said quietly. Internally he was kicking himself for breaking his own rule- never disrupt someone while they're meditating. But he couldn't help it.

"Rey?" he said again, a little more insistently.

Rey's eyes blinked open and slowly she looked up at him, smiling. He smiled back.

"What's in the bag?" he asked, and he could feel a strange mix of trepidation, fear, and forced pleasantry emanating off of her at the question.

"Master," she began in a chipper tone, pushing the sack aside and rising to her feet. She smile at him for a long moment, and he waited, but soon the smile faltered as her eyes grew sad and a tear slipped past her cheek.

"Oh, Rey…" he said sadly, and he walked up to put a comforting hand on her shoulder as she broke down.

"Master, he knows," she choked out.

Luke sighed. "How does he know?"

Rey sniffed as she tried to pull the story together. "I saw him. Last night. Somehow, I don't know, but we shared the same dream. He's been searching for me. All of the pulling in my mind has been to try and work out where I am. And before he finds out for sure, I'm going to leave here so that he never finds you."

As she finished speaking, her confidence slowly began to return despite the tears and she gritted her teeth. Her explanation had sounded childish even to her own ears, but it was the best she could come up with on the spot.

Luke's mouth was pressed into a thin line. None of this was right. He was half convinced, somehow, that everything he touched was cursed. Although curses and superstition were supposed to be beneath Jedi consideration, he still couldn't help himself- the young boy who grew up in the desert still held on to a shred of that fear of desert magic the natives of Tatooine so strongly believed in. He squeezed her shoulder lightly as his gray brows knit together.
"But where will you go?"

Rey paused. Honestly, she hadn't thought that far. Where would she go? The sector they were in was so isolated that her choices were limited. The closest friendly place she could think of was the new Resistance base, and that needed at least an extra fueling to reach from here with her current transport. But would leading him to the Resistance be any better than leading him to Luke? She bit her lip thoughtfully.

"I'm not sure," she answered finally. "Anywhere…anywhere away from here."

Luke stared at her carefully. "You're thinking of going back to the base."

She signed. "Yes, that was a thought, Master. And yes, I thought of that, too," she added for good measure. She saw him smirk as his hand dropped from her shoulder.

"But I don't want to leave you without a craft," she said with concern. "What should I—"

"I think the base is a strategically sound choice," he said, cutting her off. "If Kylo Ren has been trying to find you for as many days as you've been suffering, it doesn't seem like he's got leave from Snoke to do it, or that he'd have any back-up."

Rey's brows lifted. "Do you think…?"

Luke turned to look at her as she tried to remember.

"In the dream…he said he intended to take me back to the First Order, but the way he put it….it seemed strange. Do you really think he's acting alone?"

Luke smiled. "Why don't you look and see? Since he's caused you so much trouble," he said mischievously, "why not cause a little trouble back?"

Rey tilted her head to the side, and while she tried to return his smile, she failed. Even so, she closed her eyes, and she felt for it, that loathed piece of twine that tied his rough-hewn mind to hers. It grew taught, and suddenly….she could feel him moving through a bustle of people. She saw flashes of his surroundings, and her stomach dropped as she recognized the outpost. It wasn't far from here. Closing her eyes more tightly, she fought to regain focus and she pressed forward and felt his heart beating hard as strong whiffs of violence and exhaustion emanated off of him, and she reached.

Who is with you? she projected

No one, the answer came ricocheting back.

She gasped and her eyes flew open. She felt an arm around her back as Luke helped steady her on her feet.

"Well?" he inquired.

"He's alone," she blurted out, running her hand down her face as she tried to catch her breath. Luke nodded solemnly. She felt concern about something she couldn't quite name pass through him for a moment before it vanished completely.

"Very well," he said finally. "Return to the base, and once you're there, should it be enough of a deterrent, you can send word to me and we'll see what we can do from there."
Nodding slowly, she looked up at him and gazed at his weathered face for one long moment before wrapping her arms around him in a hug. Luke sighed, hugging his last apprentice back. *This poor, lost girl...Force guide her. *Please*.

When they let go, she gathered up her sack, and Luke watched in silence as she waved, giving him one last sad smile before starting down the ancient crumbling stairs and down to the waiting transport on the small beach, watched as she climbed inside, and took off.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter's a little on the short side (*please* forgive me!)- the next one's going to be quite long, I anticipate, so this is the only natural stopping point. Hopefully by the next chapter, we'll be caught up with the beginning of my outline which is a glorious 37 pages last I checked. Not as much Kylo in this chapter, but that's because he'll be so heavy in the next. I enjoy writing for him a bit too much- he's such a damn princess at the end of the day. We'll see how long that lasts, though~

Thank you SO MUCH FOR YOUR COMMENTS!!! I absolutely adore reading them- they push me to keep churning out this story on a daily basis, which is something I've never done before and I love it. Thanks so much for reading, guys.
Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay- these next couple chapters are setting the tone for a crucial shift in the story and I want to make sure they are impeccable. Please bear with me as they go through extra polishing. Thanks to Cally for beta reading for me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

People high enough in the world to be in-the-know knew about it. Kylo Ren had gone on a little vacation from the First Order. And there was a very discrete bounty on his head.

Unfortunately, that bounty dictated that he be brought in alive.

The bounty hunter swiveled in his seat, fingering the half empty glass before him as he dug a nail into the organic surface of the bar. He sighed. This planet was a dump, and even though his last hit had let that juicy piece of information slip past their lips in a desperate effort to change his mind, he had still made the kill. Still collected his reward. But if he went after Kylo Ren….he could live out the rest of his days on the pleasure planet of his choice. He grinned despite himself and his grip tightened on his glass.

He shot back the rest of the contents, banged it back on the counter, and watched from the corner of his eyes as the barkeep lazily turned to refill his drink. He responded with an acknowledged grunt. As much as the idea of him rolling in enough currency for fifty lifetimes appealed to him, there was still the problem of somehow incapacitating Kylo Ren. The man was a beast, and the few who survived any of his numerous ground razings called him a monster. He quietly scoffed. The weak would always think grandiose ideas about those like himself who could do as they pleased.

The door of the tavern swung open and he sensed the shuffling presence of an old woman, one of the ones who sold their goods outside in the makeshift marketplace he recalled, as she scooted along the wall taking in shallow breaths until she finally reached the barkeep. He watched as she grasped at him with gnarled hands and brought his ear down to her mouth. He took another drink. The woman shifted and, reaching into a pouch, brought out a small handful of currency belonging to First Order territory. The bounty hunter's fingers curled tightly around his glass. They were a great deal away from First Order-controlled space. How did she get that on a backwater shithole of a planet like this one? Or better yet, he concluded, who had given it to her? His eyes narrowed as he observed their continued hurried conversation despite the din of the room drowning out anything he might be able to hear, when the door swung open again and a dark cloaked figure passed through.

The establishment hardly noticed the presence of the new addition- nobody gave two shits about travelers' dramatics- but the bounty hunter quickly connected the dots and realized that this had to be the source of the old lady's prize. He heard a scuffling of feet, and as he turned to look, he saw the woman's eyes grow extremely wide as she struggled to push past the barkeep and escape into some back room.

Yeah, this was definitely the person.
Unable to suppress a grin, he brought his drink up to his lips and took a long drag, emptying it, and pushing it away down the bar. He carefully folded his hands into a point in front of him, gazing at the admittedly impressive collection of alcohol displayed behind the bar, and waited.

Finally, the bartender approached the stranger and pushed a glass towards them.

The stranger pushed it back with a gloved hand.

"No," he heard a low, masculine voice say. "I'm not interested in that. I'll take a room and I'll have a meal brought out. Anything will do."

The bounty hunter positioned himself so that he could watch the exchange indirectly, and tried to hide his surprise when he saw the stranger give a wave of his hand and the barkeep's eyes seemed to glaze over a bit.

"A room is already ready," he said, the most chipper he'd ever heard the worn out sack of bones sound. "And we'll bring you something right out."

The hood around the stranger billowed. "You won't be interested in taking any of my currency," he stated calmly, his hands doing that thing again.

He saw the barkeep actually smile. "And don't worry about it- it's all on the house," the guy said, patting the stranger amicably on the arm before turning around to make the arrangements.

Once the barkeep's attention was elsewhere, he watched as the stranger seemed to fidget and scrape his arm where the man had touched him along the table, as if he could wipe the contact off. Well, he'd never seen anything like that before…

And then it hit him. First Order currency, a hooded man…wasn't Kylo Ren supposed to have some strange mystical influence as well? Something to do with being one of the last Jedi, except he was clearly no Jedi. The Jedi Killer, he'd heard him called once. He'd gone head to head with Luke Skywalker. According to the rumors, anyway. And who knows how reliable those were.

But what was reliable was the display he'd just witnessed, and as the adrenaline rushed through him, a coldness swallowed him up as well. This is your chance. Take him in, get the reward, live better than an emperor… he swallowed hard as the fantasy overtook him and he felt himself salivating. Or go to an early grave as this guy decorates the wall with you.

Unfortunately, he didn't have enough time to make up his mind. He watched blankly as two more armed men, both of them his competition for bounties in the past, ambled up to them. How the hell did they know about the First Order hit?

"That was an interesting trick you pulled there, friend," one of them said loudly. He was covered in armor oxidized to a hazy green and he hefted a large zap stick across his shoulders. His companion, slightly shorter, giggled stupidly in his lighter leathers as his fingers rubbed across an oversized blaster, looking back and forth from his friend to the stranger. Inwardly the bounty hunter cringed-they were going to ruin everything.

The stranger never looked up, never even acknowledged them, and sat there as if he'd never been approached. The first one addressed him again.

"Maybe you should teach us how you did that…Kylo Ren."

The entire bar fell instantly silent, and at finally getting some kind of response, the man grinned proudly.
The stranger brought up a hand and carefully laid it flat against the bar top. "...you've got the wrong person." he said smoothly.

"No, I don't think we do," the man retorted, and his companion gave a hyena-ish laugh.

The stranger turned, and everyone within a five foot radius fell back. The bounty hunter smirked at the show, and quietly reached out to pull his abandoned glass back towards himself.

The two men, who had taken a step back with everybody else, seemed to pull themselves together and the leader swallowed hard. "There's a bounty on your head, Kylo Ren!"

The stranger seemed to freeze, the languid motion gone from his actions.

"...a bounty?" he replied quietly. The shorter sidekick nodded furiously, tongue nearly wagging out of his mouth at his excitement.

"Orders are to take you alive to claim it...but considering your reputation, I'll probably get something for you dead, too."

The bounty hunter saw the hood around the stranger billow again and watched as he turned back towards the bar.

"I'm not Kylo Ren," he stated again, but there was an unmistakable shakiness to his voice. The bounty hunter grinned. It was definitely Kylo Ren. The other two idiots weren't stupid enough to buy it either.

The moment Kylo turned back, the smaller one roared and came at him with the butt of his blaster. Kylo swiveled, grabbed the butt with his gloved hand, and shoved it away so hard that the gun and man together flew across the room and into a collection of people gathered in the corner. There were shouts, and a few people took the opportunity to slip out the tavern door, but most stayed. They were scum like the rest of them, and now that a bounty was involved, undoubtedly a substantial one, suddenly he wasn't the only one imaging himself in the biggest residence in the galaxy with everything you ever wanted at your fingertips. He could feel the tension rise in the room as everyone suddenly thought they were a player.

Clearly Kylo Ren could feel it, too. The bounty hunter watched as the man tensed, but nothing could prepare him for when he finally rose to his feet. At the bar, he'd clearly made an effort to compact himself, be less noticeable, even when he walked into the establishment. But now that the charade was over, he stood to his full height, towering over most of the bar patrons, and his broad shoulders created a menacing effect draped all in black. He had to admit, he was a little impressed.

The leader wasn't a small fry either, but he wasn't nearly as tall as the leader of the Ren. He looked up into the hood and swallowed hard when the shadow still successfully hid the features of the man within. Swinging his zap stick down and around his shoulders, he slammed the bottom of it on the floor and a string of electricity from its middle stretched across to the top, sparking to life. Adrenaline finally doing its job and his weapon at his side, his confidence started seeping back.

"They say you shouldn't have run off, Ren. All the famous ones are after you. It was sort of supposed to be a secret, but..." he looked around himself at the large crowd still gathered and shrugged. "So much for that," he finished with a twist of his lips, and he swung the electrified weapon towards Kylo's side.

Kylo dodged back, coming close to the bounty hunter still at the bar, and the man fingered his empty glass debating whether or not he should move out of the way. As the leader's weapon made
a downward strike, Kylo side-stepped and tried to crush the weapon under his foot but got a shock from the electric field instead. The bounty hunter watched as Kylo took a step back, and then another, and then faltered as his back hit the wall. The leader laughed, his irritating companion still knocked out in the corner and completely forgotten.

"What's the matter, Ren? Having a little problem with your foot?" he taunted.

Kylo shook out his foot once and then twice, seemed to try and put pressure on it only for it to fail. The leader roared with laughter.

"That's the thing about this weapon—fantastic for bounty hunting. All you have to do is touch it too a body part and zoop!" he said, making the motion with his free hand. "It goes all numb on ya." He giggled happily as Kylo struggled against the wall.

The leader frowned. "Come on, Kylo. Can I call you Kylo? Don't tell me a little kiss from my baby here is enough to take you down," he said tauntingly, and then his face grew dark. "What a disappointment that would be."

The bounty hunter could hear Kylo gasping as the man charged for him again, and as he got closer, Kylo brought up his hand and the man froze. The entire room gasped. His weapon raised with flickering energy, his face was stuck in its sneering expression but his eyes darted around in terror. Kylo dropped his head, trying weight again on his affected foot, and impossibly succeeded in walking on it towards the man.

"Fool," hissed Kylo. Despite his limp, he stood before his captive and looked down, listening to the sound of him struggle in his throat. Kylo took a shifting step back and raised his hand.

"What a life you've led..." he cooed softly. "Such a miserable childhood...you knew they never wanted you. Just another mouth to feed when they could hardly feed themselves. They hated that they felt compelled to feed you when they'd have preferred to eat instead."

The man choked out a sob, tears suddenly streaming down his face, and the hold on his features seemed to pull away a bit as the man let out a terrific groan of agony.

"Oh yes, and the torture, too..." Kylo continued casually. The man was screaming now. "At the hands of common thugs, criminal clubs, and even the Hutts...impressive."

The bounty hunter sat in stunned silence with everyone else. What was this? The stories weren't a lie then? He hated the man that had tried to steal his mark from him, but not even he, he concluded, deserved whatever Kylo Ren was putting him through. His eyes flashed to the hooded man as he circled his prisoner and a low, lazy chuckle emanated from the shadow covering his face.

"What did you possibly hope to achieve by—" Kylo began, when a cry erupted behind him and the small friend who had previously been unconscious roared to life and, launching from a nearby table, flew through the air and knocked the butt of his gun straight into Kylo's head. The bounty hunter blinked as Kylo went down, and the leader of the two seemed to break free of the hold and went down as well. But the smaller man kept screaming, bringing down the blaster end again and again onto the dark form until Kylo, with a scream of his own, kicked out of it and sent the man's head knocking into the same table he'd jumped from. The leader, still shaking terribly and clearly embarrassed by the wetness covering his face, trembled from the humiliation he'd endured. He saw the bounty hunter suddenly, still at the bar, when recognition passed over his face and he tried to hold back an embarrassed gasp. Recovering from all the shock, the man's eyes steeled and then he turned, pounded up to Kylo Ren, and yanked him up by the hood of his cloak.
When the hood fell away, another gasp filtered through the room. Face shielded by his dark, wavy hair, Kylo finally looked up, and every mouth in the bar was ajar. As he looked at the leader he'd just had in his grasp, he saw as the man's face contorted almost in a strange twinge of pity.

"You're so young," he whispered.

Kylo watched the leader look him over, take in his scar- as the entire room did- the blood trickling down his forehead and the bruise on his cheek, and something in him seemed to change very rapidly. His lips seemed to actually tremble.

"WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?" he screamed. He flung out his hand, shattering all the bottles behind the bar, sending shards of glass and droplets of multicolored liquid all over the place, and the bounty hunter took that as his cue to finally move.

Kylo roared as he faced off against both men as they used their weapons and he used his bare hands and his power. The bounty hunter watched as Kylo took hit after hit, even a sting on his hand from the zap stick, and still laid into them both. Finally, taking the smaller man by the throat, he watched him crush his windpipe in his fist and throw him like a ragdoll against the wall. The audience inside the bar was at about half strength now, many more people having fled, leaving just a few left, half of them looking like they could also still be waiting to take their chance at claiming the bounty.

The former leader of the duo cried out as his companion was wasted- the bounty hunter could never recall this hotshot of a man ever being this emotional before- and made a sloppy charge towards Kylo Ren. Suddenly, a large shard of broken bottle flew directly into Kylo's hand and he rammed it into the man's gut. Kylo's teeth gritted, dark hair sticking to his face with sweat and blood, and his eyes were wild as he watched the zap stick clatter out of his opponent's hands and Kylo yanked up with his glass shank, ripping a hole in him along his sternum, blood pouring out over his gloves when, finally, with his other hand, he pushed the body back to thump onto the floor.

Panting, Kylo turned to observe his work as two more bodies stood up from the tables and looked at him. Kylo met their gaze and raised his chin, motioning forward with his bloodied glove.

"Come," he lightly panted, and the two men charged.

The bounty hunter watched from the far corner of the tavern as more and more people tried their hand at defeating the once-famed First Order leader, watched as Kylo took more and more hits while still somehow managing to kill his opponents, interchangeably calm and then maddeningly brutal as he screamed out with his attacks. He bided his time. Let them come, he thought with a grin. I'll watch the show, and then when he's nice and tired… He pressed his lips together trying and failing to hold back a smile.

Kylo loomed hulking over the collection of bodies strewn around him, his boots sliding slightly on the blood-slicked floor. If the bounty hunter was honest, he'd never seen such a sight before. It was garish, even for him. But Kylo Ren…he seemed perfectly comfortable, if somewhat agitated, inside the chaos. The eye of the storm of his own making, even if another had started it. He found himself thinking absently, What is he?

Suddenly, Kylo turned towards him, framed by the bodies around his feet. He was hunched over now from the plethora of injuries, but still he stood, and was looking right at him.

Kylo's breaths were short as he spoke. "You. Are you interested in joining your fellows on the floor here?" he said, the menace gone from his voice as he licked at a trickle of blood that fell into his mouth with a shaky sigh. The bounty hunter sat back in his chair, sucking at his lip.
"I'm thinking about it," he said seriously.

Kylo breathed in and let out an impatient huff. "Well make up your mind," he insisted.

He raised a brow. "Why? You in a hurry?"

Kylo wrapped a hand around his ribs as a small, low laugh came out. "The only place I could go has a bounty out on me. The only person I could want runs from me. I don't have a lot to expect in what little time I have left, but yeah….you could say that."

The bounty hunter gave him a grin and thought over the scene he'd spent the last chunk of time observing- several fights in a row, all of them slowly whittling this beast down to the battered, bloody, and bruised thing he is now, standing before the last potential challenger. He assessed his odds, not forgetting about the reward the bounty promised. He could smell the delicacies, the hard stone beneath his tired feet of his own personal palace…

The bounty hunter sat back in his chair again and squinted his eyes.

"Yeah, alright," he said finally, and as he stood up to approach him, Kylo's eyes steeled, grabbed for the blaster strapped to his thigh, and shot the man straight through the heart.

The bounty hunter gasped, his eyes glazing over in a sort of confusion, and he fell back into his seat and died.

Chapter End Notes

In going through reylo fics on ao3, I get it. I GET IT. When the smut is not forthcoming, things can get *excruciating*. But you lovely people knew what you were getting into when you saw it tagged 'slow burn'. But just hold on, things will start to weave together sooner than you think, so keep being awesome and leaving feedback (I live for your comments!!) and being the deliriously lovely readers that you are for joining me on this crazy ride and all will be revealed. Thanks for sticking with me.
Kylo exhaled heavily, hunching over and reholstering his blaster as he struggled to step through the macabre scene of mangled limbs and leaned his shoulder heavily against the bar. He looked around, observing, his mind blessedly blank. Why had he done this? He winced.

The assassin at the inn…the people in this tavern… 'There’s a bounty on you…'

_The First Order_….he sighed, a whimper escaping his lips, and he squeezed his eyes closed despite the sting from the numerous tiny cuts that scratched his face.

This isn't what he expected. This isn't how he thought it would go at _all_. Why would they put a bounty on him? Didn't they understand why he had to go?

His mind raced as he tried to get a grasp of the timeline. Hux had taunted him, Hux had suffered for it. He'd headed for the hanger because…Rey.

His eyes rolled back into his head as his eyes fluttered closed again. Didn't they understand _anything_?

Everything was falling apart.

_This_ is why he took on these criminals. _This_ is why he had to do it with his bare hands. Gods, he was exhausted. He'd had to get his head straight- just gunning them down would've been too simple. He only had so much ammunition left anyway.

The thought of ammo had him grasping for his weapon and he hissed as he bumped a rather nasty bruise in his shoulder reaching for it. Pulling it free, he checked the charge. Seven charges left. He sighed, putting it back.

There was no going back now. He was too angry, he told himself, as he glared at the tavern entrance. With an arm wrapped around his ribs, he took a step, and then another, and then his foot slid across the floor leaving clumpy streaks on the blood-soaked planks and he flung out his free arm to try and balance himself. He took in shallow, seething breaths through his clenched teeth and stepped again, finally reaching the doors. He flung them open and stepped into the fading sunlight.

People were gathered on the fringes of the establishment, and they watched him as he struggled his way down the beaten road. Their feelings were overwhelming him—

_Monster._

_What is he?_  

_So much blood._

_Is that really Kylo Ren?_  

He was shaking now. The First Order had really cut him off. A strange emotion translated itself across his brows as they twisted from genuine hurt and betrayal to fury.

_Is no one going to stop him?_
Panicked eyes darting at the distant gathered crowd, he couldn't stand it anymore. He couldn't stand their thoughts, their feelings that they kept projecting onto him. Why did they care? Why did any of them care? They would never understand, couldn't understand, how he hadn't had a moment of peace in months since the base was destroyed, how he couldn't focus unless he was knee deep in gore and battle because she kept invading his every waking moment. But he couldn't stand their thoughts on him, and they wouldn't stop. They wouldn't stop thinking at him. He felt his mind cracking under it all.

His breath huffed harder through his teeth, spittle flying, as the sound of his gasps morphed into a long and agonizing scream and he clutched at his blaster and fired off a shot into the crowd. They screamed, they ran, and he shot again. He watched someone fall. Their thoughts were shifting now, he could almost feel the relief, and he cried louder and shot into a particularly large group of spectators once more.

His breath heaved in his chest, his bruised ribs sending signals to his brain to STOP THAT, but he couldn't. His arm dropped and his finger twitched on the trigger sporadically as he tossed back his head, trying to shift some of the blood-matted hair away from his face.

This is all her fault.

He closed his eyes. Ahhh, gods. Yes.

His thoughts seemed to click into place. All her fault, all of this. Everything was fine (wasn't it?) until she came. The girl. The 'scavenger'.

The wind blew across his face, cooling the sweat on his brow and he turned to hurry back to his ship.

Yes, it was her fault, he concluded, and a smile tugged at his lips. She tempted him, with her Light and her eyes….his breath shuddered through him as he saw them flashing before him now, as they'd looked in his interrogation chamber, as they'd looked in his dream in the snow….

Where are you? he reached out as his ship came into sight. He watched as the port crew scrambled at the sight of him, and when he saw one man clutch angrily at his tools as he looked at him, Kylo flung back his body, raised his blaster stiffly, and shot him dead.

His chest heaved and he growled, reaching over to grip harshly where he knew a significant bruise was blooming and he suppressed a scream.

More, he thought, feeling the darkness rush towards him, and he tried to use it to clear his head but it didn't seem to be working.

He turned sharply to look at either side of him, hair whipping around his face and the ends stinging his already damaged skin like tiny flails, and he watched a small group of workers huddle in a nearby mech bay. He glared at them and tried to smile when they flinched back, but something clutched at his chest and he wanted to scream again. Instead, he raised his blaster and fired two more shots at the roof of the shelter, watching as chunks flew away from the structure. More screams. More panic. Less thoughts being shoved onto him.

He stomped over to his ship, undid the tethers with a very shaky hand, and as he went to reholster his weapon, he noticed the charge. One shot left.

Suddenly, Kylo calmed.

One shot.
The entire world stilled as he stared at the readout. One shot and the blaster would be useless. One shot and he might as well throw it away. He might as well throw it away now - what was one shot even good for?

"Oh," he heard himself say aloud.

He stood, hearing the whimpers and the cries from nearby and they seemed so far away. Kylo himself was calm. Unerringly calm. One shot...and he could end it.

He took in a deep and trembling breath as he considered it. It would be so easy - just raise the blaster to his head and pull the trigger. No more anger, no compulsion to lash out, no ripping apart of his soul to adhere to this or that. No more Kylo Ren. No more Ben Solo. No more Leia Organa or Han or Hux or Snoke or... Rey.

His grip on the blaster tightened and began to shake. The calm was slipping away from him - the promised peace of death that had flashed briefly through his mind becoming just another false illusion like everything else. Everything was a lie. Everything but her.

"Rey..." he gasped as his finger twitched on the trigger.

He gritted his teeth, thinking, staring at the ground. He raised the weapon before him, shot into the wilderness, and flung the blaster into the tall grass as far as his broken body would allow with a guttural scream.

It was so easy now. He turned, climbed up the retractable ladder, secured himself in the cockpit, and took off, leaving the chaos his presence had wrought far below him as he soared into space.

He reached out. "Rey..." he said tersely aloud, and she was there. He could feel her. And she had moved.

Adrenaline he didn't think he had left spiked through him. She'd moved, and she was calling to him - he'd just been too preoccupied to notice. It was weak, vague. She was clearly trying to imitate his efforts without really understanding how to do it.

*She really needs a teacher,* he thought absently, and the idea brought an upward tug to his lips.

"Oh, I'm coming..." he said quietly, closing his eyes to feel. He tapped the coordinates into the computer and jumped to hyperspace.

---

Rey only brought with her what she needed. Any more would weigh the light transport down and right now speed was preferable over baggage. When she realized she recognized the outpost Kylo was on, she'd pushed her little ship as fast as it could go and she was soon approaching her first waypoint. Once she touched down, refueled, and maybe restocked a bit if there was anything worth getting, she'd just be one step away from the wasteland planet the Resistance had set up their new base on.

Although she knew she was safe in hyperspace, the anxiety wouldn't stop tingling at the back of her neck. She hated it. Standing up, she left the cockpit and walked to the small commons area the ship had and paced around the tiny floorspace, biting her nails surreptitiously. She hoped this would work. This *needed* to work. If Kylo couldn't be thrown off by the presence of the entire Resistance, well... well then they'd just capture him.

This idea caused Rey to let go a breath she had no idea she was holding and she sunk down onto
the hard bench along the shuttle wall. Yes, they'd capture him. 

"And then either way this will all be over," she thought to herself, and she felt some of the prickling leave the back of her neck as she closed her eyes.

A storm of emotions hit her suddenly. Like a hard knock to the chest, like she used to feel when she was small and not good at clinging to the edge of the dead cruisers yet and she'd slip and fall flat against the hard sand and all the breath would come out of her. She hunched over, hand grasping at the bench space next to her, and a cry escaped her throat.

It wasn't exactly pain. Or maybe it was? A heady mixture of rage and futility and pure passion, and a dozen other things she could feel but couldn't precisely name, coursed through her and she felt her heart about to burst. It was too much! Too much! Too much to feel for any one person and yet….

Her eyes flashed open and she knew. Somehow…through their connection, this was all Kylo Ren. Her brows knit together as a hand rose to her chest to clutch at her heart.

"How...?" she thought desperately. Tears began streaming unbidden from her eyes as she succumbed to the emotions overwhelming her. She choked back a sob that threatened to escape past her lips, but when another came close behind it, she couldn't stop it. She could no longer see, the sobs overcoming her, and soon she was curled against the freezing floor of the ship, weeping.

She grabbed at her knees as she stopped resisting— it was impossible to stop it. Instead she just wondered over and over how a being like Kylo Ren could feel just so much. It didn't make sense. How could someone so cold feel so hotly, so vehemently, as if to spite the freezing exterior he so carefully cultivated.

It swirled around her, and just as she thought she'd choke and probably die from the tears, a sudden wave of eerie calm washed over her and she gasped for air greedily as her crying stopped. Like a fish she'd once seen on Takodana pulled out of its precious water, she sucked in the air like it was all she ever wanted, and she relaxed her muscles, dropping her head against the floor, and fell back into the calm. Although it felt a bit tainted, almost conditional, she held onto it for every ounce of relief it offered.

Suddenly, it was all over, and Rey just stared blankly in front of her, eyes level with the dusty floor, mouth slightly agape.

"How could he feel so much?"

Rey could sense her arm and her leg pressed against the ship's floor start to go numb from the cold when the cockpit began beeping incessantly, warning her that she'd soon leave hyperspace, and she gingerly pulled herself up and heavily ambled back into the pilot's chair, eyes leaden and hooded as the ship punched through and the first way planet emerged looming before her.

She thought very little as she steered carefully through the atmosphere and landed at the docking port for the planet's trading outpost. Everything became perfunctory as she paid the docking fee and sought out what the outpost had to offer. A few rations, a few vanity items and knickknacks. As she was in mid-negotiation with a local for a canister of water, she heard him.

"Rey..." the voice whispered against her unsteady mind.

She sighed, taking in a breath, and quickly excused herself from the confused merchant. She walked quickly, almost running, to the edge of town, and closed her eyes and reached.
"Yes," her own mind whispered to him. "I'm here. Come to me. I'm right here."

She thought she could feel a spike of excitement along the thickening twine that bound them and her eyes steeled.

Yes, come, she thought. Come this way and far, far away from Ahch-to.

Pressing her lips together in determination, she ran back to the merchant, completed her transaction, and was quickly back aboard her shuttle, full speed for the Resistance base.

Chapter End Notes

You guys are incredible. Thank you so much for all your kind thoughts- reading what you all had to say really blew me away and helped me get an idea of how things are working through impartial eyes. Please keep doing so and I promise to continue reading every word you write carefully.

As for this chapter, it went into places I never intended, never planned, and it is darkly beautiful. I hope it lived up to expectations. Thank you all so much for sharing your thoughts and taking the time out to read- I love you all.
Tag

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your patience, guys. I'm actually in Japan right now- things have been crazy. Hopefully more regular updates will resume soon, but know that I have two other chapters already done! Enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Run- fast as you can.
No, no one has to understand.
Fly high across the sky, from here to kingdom come,
and fall back down to where you're from.

Don't you fret my dear...
Oh, it'll all be over soon.
I'll be waiting here
For you.” — The Civil Wars 'Kingdom Come'

She didn't expect him to be so close behind when she came out of hyperspace. Maybe her call to him had been too good. Either way, she was now faced with what looked to be a very modded TIE fighter on the tail of her humble transport.

She whipped forward on the steering yoke to dive beneath him and her radio crackled to life.

"Rey?"

Her eyes widened as she grit her teeth, pushing the ship into maneuvers it wasn't designed for and felt it rattle under her touch.

"Finally caught up, have we?" she called back.

How did he even know her frequency? She flicked at the controls and nearly cried. He had jammed her communications. It was now impossible for her to make contact with the planet below and the Resistance base that hid on its desolate surface.

Rey felt her body tense and a thin sheen of sweat break out on her face. This was not how this was supposed to go.

As she zig-zagged across space in an effort to shake any of his attempts to get a lock, she heard his deep yet unnervingly boyish voice come over the radio again.

"I've been looking for you," he said, and she heard a falter in his tone that she wasn't sure was him or the signal.

Rey arched a brow as she tried to make a 90 degree break and skim the planet's atmosphere. If she tried to go into hyperspace now, he'd be able to follow exactly behind her. Although she could see his ship was a little worse for wear, there was no mistaking its superiority. Her transport wasn't
built for combat, had no weapons systems. She had a shield at best and her own talent at the
colors, but wasn't sure if that would be enough. If she could hit the planet's atmosphere at just the
right angle, though….if he could leave her alone for just long enough, maybe she could use the
planet's gravity to slingshot her away. He wouldn't be able to follow her so easily then.

As she prepped the ship as best she could for what could very well be a suicide maneuver, she
angled the shields to the ship's belly and watched the hull burn red as it started to skim the
atmosphere.

"I remember. You told me before, right? In the woods, on the false Starkiller Base."

The temperature in the ship was beginning to rise- if she wasn't careful it would break apart under
the stress. She felt her tie to him hiss on top of it all, his absolute certainty now that the dream had
been real, that they had somehow impeded upon each other's unconscious minds, followed by
another different emotion that was gone before she could contemplate what exactly it was.

She saw his ship hovering above hers, just enough away from the atmospheric burn, and as she
looked up through the glass of the cockpit she saw (she was sure she was imagining it- had to be
imagining it as he was too far away) his penetrating gaze slicing straight to her.

Kylo seemed to keep his distance, as if he were contemplating what exactly she was planning on
doing. The chase had been brief, obligatory, but this was something else altogether. Her ship
looked like it was on fire as it streaked across the planet and for once, he wasn't sure what to do.
He could feel, somehow, that she herself was growing increasingly warm. Perhaps dangerously so.

"Rey," he called to her again through the radio. He was the only one she could talk to, after all.

"Whatever you're planning on doing," he continued, "you're smart enough to know that simple
transport isn't designed for it. Hull integrity is already failing. Stop this and land."

Rey scoffed, raising up a shaky hand to her face to try and wipe away the sweat now pouring down
her entire body, but as it hit her eyes it burned and her heart lept into her throat as her hand faltered
briefly on the controls in reflex to the pain before correcting her angle as she piloted her ship on.
She was so close- if she could just push a little bit faster…

Kylo's grip was white-knuckled as he watched her ship dip, and when she quickly righted it, it
finally occurred to him what she was intending to do. Pressing his lips together, he adjusted his
targeting knobs and made no effort to hide it, his weapons primed on her exhaust.

"You know that ship won't survive a slingshot," he said hurriedly, his words staccato as he tried to
quickly formulate a plan to diffuse hers.

A panel that had come loose from the heat melting its joints wretched away from Rey's vessel and
flew off, nearly missing Kylo's ship. Both of them jumped and it jolted across their connection,
making them unsure of who had felt what.

Rey's computer wouldn't stop beeping at the fact his ship was targeted onto hers and coupled with
the heat, it was beginning to drive her mad. She couldn't give in to the pressure. She had no choice
but to take advantage of the fact that he wanted her alive and wouldn't dare shoot her down. Rey's
eyes burned again suddenly as tears mixed with her sweat and she cursed under her breath. Her
mouth only partially held back a sob, trying desperately to clear her vision enough to at least see
her read outs.

"I don't understand why you're doing this!" she cried out to him finally. "Unless you want me dead,
burned up in the atmosphere, leave now, Kylo Ren!"

Her voice choked as the tears streaked down her face and the controls under her hands began to shake. More alerts sounded and she knew she may never make it to the right speed to slingshot, and at this stage, even if she could, would her ship survive it? She screamed sharply in frustration and bit hard into her cheek.

Kylo growled, his lip twitching as he weighed his options, watching her ship burn up in front of him. It didn't take a sim to see that her chances of pulling off her bluff were slim, and shooting her down yielded only slightly better odds for her survival. Either way, giving up and letting her go, letting her get farther away again when he was right on top of her, was not an option. He grimaced as his grip tightened on the controls and he moved in closer.

"You know I can't do that…" he said quietly.

Rey looked up and saw the shadow of his ship looming above hers. Unable to go any faster, and unwilling to give up all of her progress, she glared angrily as the speed reading hovered relatively unchanged before staring up at the Admiral TIE now directly above her cockpit.

"What are you doing?" she shouted at him.

Kylo gave a small, empty smile.

"Saving you," he replied. "I think."

And with that, Rey watched in horror as the TIE aligned itself just off-center and crashed down onto the back end of her ship, pushing it down through the atmosphere of the planet and out of slingshot trajectory.

Kylo heard her scream over the radio but his expression remained unchanged. He glanced out of the glass and saw as the wings of her transport and the wings of his Admiral tangled inextricably together, the metal of her ship malleable from prolonged exposure to such high heat, and felt as they spun, plummeting together towards the planet's surface and an inevitable crash trajectory.

He took his hands away from the controls as casually as if he were planning to disembark, ignoring pointedly the chorus of alarms ringing from every one of his ship's consoles. He tightened his pilot's harness and reached back for his helmet before lazily pulling it over his head.

"I recommend," he called again, his voice pitched impossibly low through the helmet's modulator, "That you tighten your restraints and prepare for ejection."

He could feel her terror and annoyance bleeding through to him, and as much as a part of him was amused, he couldn't shake some sense of terror himself.

If we're going to die, we're going to die together.

Their ships were tumbling rapidly through the sky of the wasteland with nothing but hard, parched earth waiting to greet them. He had no idea what would happen if they survived this, but he'd deal with it if they survived.

As they came close to ejection altitude, "I hate you," he heard Rey's voice say over the din, and he couldn't help but smile.

"Pretty last words, for a Jedi," he quipped back, but there was no force behind it, and Rey clung tightly to her harness as the universe spun around her. She'd already stopped trying to keep up with
what direction they were going in, all of her senses focused on anticipating the one alert that would tell her it's safe to eject. Somehow she started to feel a sense of calm come over her as she stared up at his ship lodged against hers. If she's going to die, she'll at least take him with her. Hopefully.

"Tell me!" she half sobbed. "Please tell me why we're probably going to die right now? Why all of this had to happen? At least before I die for it?"

Kylo's aloofness faltered and he frowned. Absently he tugged on the straps of his harness although they could go no tighter and he paused. "You should never have gotten involved with the Resistance. You should have stayed on Jakku. Stayed a scavenger."

"I tried!" she screamed back at him. "But every single person I met told me to leave."

He scoffed. "You were foolish to listen to them."

"No I wasn't!" she shouted defensively, almost on reflex. She frowned, not exactly sure how she could justify how she hadn't been wrong, but she could make out details on the surface now and knew they were getting close. She heard him sigh.

"You ruined me," came his clipped voice. He spoke slowly. "This is all your fault." and as her brows shot up in incredulous shock at such a suggestion, she heard a loud bang as the canopy of his ship flew open and his pilot's seat shot into the air. She felt it- the ejection was premature.

"No!" she screamed, and as his form disappeared into the deep azure sky of the planet, her console finally rang with ejection warnings. She stared at the flashing symbols [EJECT] [EJECT] [EJECT] blaring across every screen and, breathing heavily, she gripped one hand into her harness and slammed her hand on the eject button. She felt herself sucked out of the top of the transport and the freezing air sliced through her overheated skin. She couldn't breathe as she soared higher and higher, trying desperately to keep her head pressed back against the headrest, and as stars flickered across her vision, she saw the silver billow of a parachute before she blacked out completely.

Chapter End Notes

So they finally meet!! Aaaand I kinda ripped off 'Farscape' a bit but the idea was *so good* I had to use it. This chapter is a lot shorter than I thought it was?? I'm really sorry. But like I said, I already have two more chapters in the wings. Angsty times are ahead of us, my dears. I hope you're prepared. And thanks SO MUCH as always to all of you who have left comments and kudos and subbed and all that good stuff-- I love, no, LIVE to read what you guys have to say, so thank you so much. :)
It concerned him how little he understood any of his actions since his training had restarted. As his thoughts flashed across his mind in a rare moment of lucidity, he wondered if he hadn't become completely unhinged after the Supreme Leader had begun the finishing touches on his mind. But it hadn't been all Snoke, had it? The Force had intervened, too. He had felt it at the time, although had no space to contemplate it, but the Force, in all its ambiguous glory, had made several very active intrusions into his fragile mind at the time. It was utterly unheard of.

In their last moments, she was screaming at him, begging him for an answer to all this, wanting to at least have some sort of reason to justify the insanity. But he had had none to give. He felt the bitter sting of treacherous tears come into his eyes as his lips twisted into a confused expression. "You ruined me," was the best he could come up with. And it was true. "This is all your fault."

Ahh, the old mantra. He'd been telling himself this so much lately he was starting to believe it now. Maybe a part of him actually did believe it. After all the lies, all the betrayal, all of the false futures promised and shattered at his feet, he believed in nothing now. Maybe he believed in her. Believed in her existence. Because it was indisputable. Her. Rey. The Girl. Strong in the Force, just as he was. Capable of so much she didn't know.

In his deadened state of mind, the idea was like a small piece of foam left floating in an ocean to cling to when all else suggested he should just go ahead and drown.

So he clung to it. Clung to her. But even that made him angry for some reason. In a move he could only describe a split second later as "rash", he slammed his hand down on the eject button despite the high altitude and was flung into the sky and away from her and the impossible conversation she was so desperate to have.

The air was so thin, but thanks to his helmet he could still manage to suck in several gasps. The lack of oxygen made him light headed, drunk even, but as much as it disoriented him, he never passed out. After what seemed like forever in free-fall, there was a jolt and he felt himself lifted again into the air and looked up to spot a silver parachute billowing above him. He looked detachedly at the barren landscape around him and thought dully of how it stretched forever into flat, dusty nothing. No oases, no lakes or oceans. He thought briefly that he'd have to go back and try to find his ship once he landed. How far away would he end up?

He turned his head, but doing so was a mistake. His brain swam, but as he struggled to focus into the distance, he saw not too far away another chute like his own and he couldn't help but smile as the darkness closed in around him. So she made it.

Rey awoke to find herself upright and with a split lip, the dingy land of the cracked planet shrouded in early dusk. She pushed her elbows away from her body and nearly screamed. Her skin, burned raw from the heat of the atmosphere-skimming ship and burned again from the sudden icy cold of high atmosphere, sent unimaginable signals of pain to her brain. Every inch of her seemed to suffer. Sucking in several deep breaths and trying to clear her mind of the altitude-induced haze, she slowly, carefully, brought up her arms and reached up to undo the harness clasp. Her fingers
tugged at the buckle, and when it didn't give, she dared to tug a little harder despite the sharper sensation of pain it elicited. It was no good. Her harness was jammed.

Rey sighed and plunked her head against the headrest. In her boot, she knew, she still kept her knife from Jakku, but could she reach it? She strained against the straps and realized that where she was covered, her clothing had mostly protected her, and so she carefully reached down, risking the rub and hissing as sparks of pain flew along her forearm. She whimpered as her raw fingers brushed against the rough material of her boots to finally fish out her rough-hewn weapon. Easing herself back up, it took about 15 minutes to cut through the sturdy material of the harness straps before she was finally free.

The jammed buckle of the harness made a loud clang as it dropped against the bottom of the seat, and as she stepped away from the pilot's seat, her head swam and she reached out to steady herself.

The planet looked as cracked and broken as she felt. There were no signs of any plants or life in any direction. She took in an uneasy breath. Was the Resistance's new base really here? If not….

Her eyes scanned the horizon until they spotted just what she had hoped- smoke. Supplies, water, rations- the age old list came echoing back into her head. These were her priorities now, and gingerly, mindful of her exposed and protesting legs, she began the journey to the wreckage.

Would he be there? she suddenly thought.

She stopped, looking around again. "You ruined me," she heard him say in her mind again as she replayed their last few moments. "This is all your fault."

She squeezed her eyes shut. She knew what he was saying was ridiculous. What he was, what he'd spent years making himself to be, had nothing to do with her. Nothing was her fault.

"You should have stayed on Jakku."

She clenched her fists at the recollection and a scowl marred her face. How dare he. He knew nothing. She sucked on the broken skin of her swollen lower lip and started to make her way, despite the pain ripping through her, with gusto. Whoever gets there first is the one who will survive. I will survive. And I'll cover myself in whatever bacta is left on both ships. First to the wreckage goes the spoils.

—

Kylo remembered briefly pulling at the release on his harness before tumbling down from his ejected pilot's seat and being embraced by dark oblivion once more. When he finally came fully to, it was to find the world shrouded in night and his body veritably screaming.

Everything hurt, and for all his several seconds of trying and failing to figure out why, as clarity began to return to him, he realized it was probably a combination of, well, everything. When he'd fought the bounty hunters and the tavern vermin, he'd used every muscle in his body to do it, and it had felt good at the time. Now, coupled with lack of sleep, the crash, the impact, he wondered if he was dying.

Digging his gloved fingers into the dirt, he tried to push himself off of the ground before his arms gave out from under him and he tumbled back down. Everything was stiff, heavy. Nothing obeyed his commands. As he twisted to roll over onto his back, a sharp and deep pain radiated through his entire core and he yelled. Gripping at his side, it was the bowcaster wound.

He couldn't think about that, about why it was there or why it was suddenly hurting him again.
Still couldn't bring himself to contemplate anything about it. Clenching his jaw and fuming through his teeth, he rolled back onto his stomach and willed himself to his feet. He cried out, his face still locked in a sharp grimace, and he stumbled a few paces before finally evening out. His breathing was heavy through the pain and as he looked up, directly in front of him was a dim glow in the distance. He stilled, considering it, and then carefully scanned the rest of the horizon. The planet was beyond desolate, and as the glow was the only substantial thing in range of him, he clenched his arm around his abdomen, tried to make his shaky mind pull the force close, and went towards it.

—

Rey was raised by the desert, but this wasn't the desert. This was something else entirely. Something that sucked the very moisture from your pores and left you a withered, burnt husk.

It had taken her hours to reach the source of the smoke, the flatness having been misleading as to how close it had been, and the only thing that kept her guided in the right direction were the flames licking at the sky. She was right, it had been the crash. 'Had' being the operative word. By the time she reached the wreckage, it was happily aflame. Nothing was salvageable.

Rey felt the overwhelming urge to cry. Standing there in front of the small inferno her shoulders slumped and her head hung down in front of her. *Stop that,* she felt herself think. *This is the reaction of a child.* But she couldn't help it. If only one of the ships had remained somewhat intact, then she could have gotten rations or water or *something* instead of nothing on a planet that had nothing.

Unsure of what else to do, she just stood, staring at it. Maybe if she waited for the fire to end, maybe in some random compartment….

There was an explosion and a large lick of fire shot up suddenly towards the star-speckled sky. Her lips wavered, and although logic told her there would be nothing to find in even the smallest corner of these two twisted ships in such a raging fire, she couldn't help herself. She sat down where she stood, crossing her legs in front of her, and the reprieve from standing, from walking at least, washed over her as she watched it all blaze on.

She didn't know how long she sat there, or when she began to doze off.

—

He kept his arm plastered around his midsection, mildly afraid that if he moved it, the pain would come again and he would actually have to think about that damned wound and what to do about it. To keep himself going, he had emptied his mind, focused only on the dim light in front of him when, like light, airy seedlings on the wind, the thoughts came wafting towards him.

He saw a small girl with three even smaller buns pulled into her hair. He saw as she scaled dangerous derelict ships. And he saw as she lay shivering, fighting back tears, as she clutched a newly handmade doll formed from the orange of old Rebel fatigues.

He sighed, never wavering in his pace, but he didn't block it out- he let the images hit him one after the other, and suddenly the girl was a bit older now but still not yet reaching maturity.

He saw her stronger, more sure, as she leapt over large metal chasms, and watched as she sucked on the tiny cuts that peppered her hands when she couldn't yet afford new gloves to help her wrench out parts still hidden in ships. He saw her resting in a new place, her own place he sensed, but her eyes were colder. The tears and worry came less to them now, but when they did, they overtook
her, and her entire form would shake and shiver in despair and loneliness.

He wasn't sure when he'd stopped walking but his breath had quickened by the time the images faded.

*What was that?* he wondered.

When he reached out for the only person those images could have belonged to, he found her asleep. Quietly, silently, he withdrew from her mind.

Digging his boot into the ground, he resumed his former pace, and with what whispers of the projection he could still grasp, he tried to discern the direction they'd come from but it was to no avail. Silently he cursed, and he clutched tightly to the fabric of his dusty tunic.

He couldn't have been the only one to see the light on the horizon. It was the only place to go.

—

A prickling sensation like needles against her skin or cold water suddenly hit the back of her neck and she flinched upright, opening her eyes to the dim promise of dawn and a gross, smoldering mass before her.

She gasped. The fire was finally out. But as she rose to her feet, the sensation at the back of her neck—perhaps cold water was more apt after all—didn't go away. Her mind chose to ignore it, and instead her instincts kicked into action as she surveyed the damage and began combing her way through the burnt ships.

In all her years as a scavenger, she'd never seen anything like this. The two ships, between her maneuver and the subsequent fire, had literally become *fused*, and sat before her as one nearly impenetrable mass of melted metal. Compartments were welded shut, and what few she could pry open gave up nothing but charred lumps of what had once been their contents. All of Rey's provisions had been destroyed, her water canisters burst. If Kylo had brought anything with him as well, she couldn't find it. At least not anything intact.

The feeling at the back of her neck caused the hairs there to rise. Kylo. Climbing out of the wreckage and looking off into the distance she could just make out a tall black figure slowly making its way towards her and her heart began to beat furiously.

*At least there's nothing for him to take.*

Somehow, even though the same applied to her as well, that idea was comforting.

Planting her feet on the ground, she stood there and watched him. He was still distant, but close enough for her to make out his obviously pained gait. He was clearly wounded, but surprisingly she didn't relish much in the idea. This wasn't a desert, but it was close enough, and the ill-provisioned adrift in such an environment, especially injured, were always to be pitied.

A searing heat, a flash of anger charged across her mind at the conclusion of that thought, accompanied by a feeling of disdain. She frowned. Had he heard her thoughts? Exhausted as she was, she tried to check through her mental defenses but found no obvious holes. She would worry about it later.

Now that the ships were definitely impossible it left only one option—finding the Resistance base. Wherever it was.
She sighed.

With no physical markers and nothing at all to distinguish itself along the horizon, Rey closed her eyes and reached out for any signs of life she could find. She breathed in, felt the dry dust beneath her boots, and breathed out, feeling the arid atmosphere drying out her throat.

*There.* Out towards her left, in a north-westernly direction. Something living. Perhaps several somethings living. She dared to let a small smile creep along her lips.

Glancing back behind her, she saw Kylo coming steadily closer, and, turning her back on him, she followed the pull of life.

—

He no longer felt the burn of his muscles after that first hour of walking, but his side was still almost unbearable. Something was definitely wrong. Too bad he didn't have time to worry about it.

Following the flames had been wise as his mind was too noisy after the visitation of the scavenger's dream-thoughts to truly focus on anything more complicated than 'see light, follow light'. As day started to take hold, he could make out the massive burnt out hulls of both their ships and a lone figure picking around it like a carrion fowl around a corpse.

Rey.

He let go a sigh. She had clearly survived the landing better than he had. His side prevented him from moving faster, so instead he tried reaching out only to be met with sturdy walls at the edges of her mind. Scowling, he looked on and watched as her small figure climbed out of the wreckage and looked towards him.

*Yes, I'm right here…* he thought, and was instead met with a wave of impersonal pity emanating from her. His eyes flared and he bared his teeth. The last thing he needed from her was that.

He thought he saw her move back a bit and he readily took a small bit of satisfaction from it, but sighed loudly as she turned around and started walking away.

*Where the hell is she going?* he growled to himself, and watched as she left, carrying nothing more than herself and a very familiar metallic gleam shining at her hip.

This was unacceptable. He sucked in a breath and forced himself to quicken his pace- pain meant nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Soo, a little bit more setup. It's lonely out in the wastes, after all.

THANK YOU to Chai, Karla, Huy, Lilith, icybae, Shadow1, and Nina10 for your comments on the last chapter!! I realize it'd been a bit of time since the last update, and I was pleased to read you guys' thoughts.

I've been really worried over this and the next chapter, worried that they might be dragging or that if I don't do them just right the rest of the story won't work. x.x So please do let me know what you think, because next chapter...
Rey bit at parched, cracked lips. Her mind was capable of only two thoughts- one, the desperate and overwhelming need for water. Two, Kylo Ren.

He was behind her.

He was gaining. Steadily.

Even when she felt the need to push herself a little bit faster, it seemed he matched her pace. Her mind had hours ago given up on the idea of ever losing him. Despite her very bones aching, all she did now was try and prepare for their inevitable clash.

Like the never-changing horizon stretched out before her, he was a constant- ever there, ever at her back. And as night started to fall, chilling her after being scorched by the planet's sun, her thirsting, starving mind considered what to do about it. Should she keep moving and pray to the stars he drops dead first? Or should she just stop caring, fall asleep where she stands, and let fate take its course? As the darkness crept in, although she could still feel him, she could no longer see him, and somewhere along the way she found herself on her knees and curled up into a shivering, shuddering ball drifting instantaneously to sleep.

—

Despite the heat this planet seemed to radiate from its very crust, Kylo did not remove his helmet. The armor was smartly designed, allowing for good air circulation, and even some amount of cooling, to be generated within, and anything that prevented the excretion of sweat on this planet was something he would take advantage of.

He was still desperately thirsty.

Kylo Ren had never wanted for anything. Neither had he before Kylo had ever existed. The desperate desire to claw one's own throat open for some relief from the dryness was a new one and something he felt he'd never ever get used to. He assumed he was hungry as well, but considering how the pain had been steadily increasing in his side, it was difficult to tell one sensation from another.

But he was getting closer.

He could make out the details of Rey's back now, and as they trudged along he became intimately familiar with the cut of her vest, its rough decorative padded ridges, and her low-slung tunic that fell over her cut-off pants. He could make out, too, the streaks her sweat made down her filthy calves and found himself oddly fascinated with the patterns it created against her skin.

There was little else to do in this situation but to watch her struggle on in front of him, but strangely he didn't mind.
Here. Right here, he thought, over and over. And then he blinked. *I'll never let her out of my sight again.*

The thought came to him suddenly, completely unbidden, but he liked it. She would never escape him. She was here, real, in front of him, and nothing would change that, even if he had to follow behind her for eternity. For some reason, he felt his eyes become moist but he willed the reaction away. Water could *not* be wasted.

When night came, he lost sight of her, but he felt as she collapsed and her mind slipped into sleep. He stopped, boots digging into the dirt, and nodded.

*This is fine,* his exhausted mind concluded, and he followed suit, pulling his cowl around himself against the biting night chill, and passed into slumbering oblivion.

—

Huddled on the ground, she found herself dreaming again. She dreamt of every terrible day on Jakku, every day she starved and thirsted, every day she failed to bring in any parts- days wasted earning nothing. She saw her younger self huddled in her then newly acquired AT-AT, clutching her doll made from bits of not yet desiccated fabric she found as she scavenged, made after some figure she only half recalled and couldn't place at all. She dreamed of her ocean, the island of peace and promise and *belonging,* and at that she could feel as his mind found its way to hers but even in her sleep she was too tired to care. She let him watch.

The dreams, like the night before, were exhausting. After she awoke, she stood in the dim sunrise and tried to dust herself down with her burnt hands. When she turned around, however, she froze. He was there in the distance, standing, waiting. She swallowed hard against her dry throat. He didn't move closer, didn't move until he saw her move, and although a part of her panicked to still see him there, still see him chasing despite it all, she couldn't even cry. There was no moisture left in her, and *this* day, as she began to trudge along, made the day before seem infinitely more bearable.

Her skin sloughed and her lips bled. She tried desperately not to pick at them- blood was still precious, precious moisture- but it was almost like a compulsion.

As the sun moved to its burning apex overhead, Rey had no idea how she was still moving, and even less of an idea how *he,* helmet on and clad head to toe in black, was still functional at all. Her breaths came in audible gasps now and her throat felt raw.

It occurred to her then that they were probably going to die on this planet. There was no one here. Her information must've been wrong. The Force must've led her astray. But as dusk set in and the cold crept back into her to replace the heat of the day, a small light in the distance suddenly caught her attention. It was then that she noticed a small group of figures quickly approaching her.

Instinctively she reached for her lightsaber and ignited it. The hiss as it activated was a comfort after so many days of not practicing, but deep down she hoped these people would help her and not fight her.

"Please!" she choked out. Her voice sounded strange and rough and not like her own. "I don't wish to fight you, but *please* if you could spare some water…"

The figures came within hearing distance and stopped. She paused, waiting for a response as her head spun from the sudden adrenaline rush.
"You there!" one of them called. Its accent was strange. "Should know better than to ask strangers
for supplies on wastelands. What you got to trade for it?"

Rey looked up in confusion, their silhouettes outlined by the fading sunlight. She knew they were
right- she would have done the same on Jakku. No one could ever spare anything on planets like
this. But as she went over her inventory in her mind, she realized she had nothing.

"That weapon there!" it called again. "We give you water for that!" it shouted helpfully.

Rey frowned, looking down at the saber in her hand and somewhere in the back of her mind she
could feel her connection with Kylo burn but she promptly ignored it. She looked up, shaking her
head whether they could see it or not. "No!" she shouted back. "Ask for something else!"

She watched as they chattered amongst themselves before turning back to her. "Nothing else we
want from you. Other than the meat off your bones. But you ain't got much there neither!"

They laughed at her and she huffed.

"The weapon for water. That's it!" it cried.

"I already said no!"

She watched them fidget and felt as their bodies tensed. "You trade or we take! What's it be?"

Rey's teeth gritted and she clutched her weapon in her hands. They charged. But instead of just the
three she'd seen, more, maybe triple the number, came at her. She was so tired. How had she not
noticed?

When the first one reached her, she swung, missed, but then gouged it in the side, disabling it. She
slashed the next one, and stabbed the one after that, but what should have taken relatively little
effort had already worn her down. Her arms felt like lead weights as she tried to swing with
something resembling form. Too many...

Her eyes felt heavy, breath coming painfully, as she watched the next wave come towards her. She
winced, raised her weapon, and even felt the beginnings of a scream well up deep in her chest, but
the line of the oncoming gang flew away from her suddenly and the cool feeling at her back sprang
up anew. Rey held her weapon aloft, on guard against them, but watched as every one that tried to
get near her was pushed back and one by one they choked, violently, and died where they stood.
She panted, her arms finally failing, and as she felt the life force slip away from the last one, she
thumbed off her weapon and fell to her knees. She felt a swish of fabric brush past her as the large,
looming shadow at her back came into full view and walked past her, towards the fire ahead, and a
shout and the sound of clanging of items floated towards her.

She rolled back onto her heels and, somehow managing to clip her saber to her belt, fell over onto
the ground. She blinked slowly, the firelight coming in and out of focus, saw the mass of her
shadow tearing apart the gang's camp, and when she opened her eyes again, she felt herself propped
up and something cold and wet sliding down her throat.

"Drink," said a familiar, unmodulated voice, and she did. He held it up to her mouth, trying and
failing to bring up her arms up to hold it herself as she felt her body slump against his chest and
took greedy gulps before the priceless drink was slowly pulled away and she could feel him
beneath her taking a few draughts for himself before pressing the container back to her lips.

She felt his arms underneath her shoulders and somehow her feet managed to semi support her as
he led her, grunting himself, to the campfire.
She was falling in and out of consciousness, she concluded. It was the only way to explain how there was nothing and then suddenly copious amounts of hot food being put into her hands.

She felt him press into her mind. *Eat*, he compelled her. She could fight it, she knew, but she didn't. She needed to eat, and if his will helped her manage it, she'd take it.

Just this once.

—

When the wasteland *trash* had decided to engage her, the choice had been easy. Weaponless, he used the only thing he had- the Force- as his broken saber still bobbed uselessly at his side, little more than a sentiment piece at this point.

He watched her strength finally fail after taking out a few of them, and so he finished them off, passing her prone form in favor of viciously tearing over their supplies. The canisters of water stood out to him first and, checking to make sure it actually was water, he turned back to Rey sprawled in the dirt.

He pulled off his helmet, the cold air hitting his exposed face with a shock, and lifted her upright only to have her collapse against him. He held back a gasp as he fumbled to tilt her face back and lifted the canister to her mouth as the liquid passed between her lips.

"Drink," he croaked out, and as she became more responsive in his arms he carefully pulled the container away and drank as much as he could force down his throat at once. Pulling away to take in deep breaths, he pushed the metal edge back towards her mouth and watched as she cracked her eyes open and drank.

Once it was emptied, he tossed it away and began pulling her towards the camp. His mind, after two days of inertia, grasped at the pointed focus of his mission- water, food, rest. He leaned her against a large rucksack and quickly cooked the rations he found, shoving a plate into her hands after splitting the bread with her. Her eyes seemed to glaze over as they stared into the fire.

*Eat*, he pushed with the force, shoving another mouthful into himself, and gave a satisfied grunt as she slowly brought the food to her ruined lips.

—

Rey's eyes fluttered open, and as her mind slowly shifted into motion, she realized that she had no idea where she was. Everything was in a haze. The fire in front of her was burned down to dimly glowing embers, and the first thing she realized was that while her throat still hurt when she swallowed, it was infinitely better than before, and for the first time in days, her stomach wasn't tearing itself inside out.

Her eyes swept the camp and she saw dark lumps in the distance, but none of it mattered when her eyes landed on Kylo, maskless, dozing five feet away from her on the ground. She blinked. How did she end up here? How did *they* end up here?

Nothing was making sense save for the tiny familiar nagging at the back of her mind telling her to 'Run from Kylo Ren'. And so, on auto pilot, she gropingly picked herself up, gazed off in a direction free from what she was more and more beginning to suspect were dead bodies, and forced her stiff legs to carry her away.
Something felt off and Kylo awoke with a jolt. He sat upright, eyes thick with sleep, and scanned the camp.

She was gone.

He jumped to his knees and regretted it instantly as excruciating pain rippled from his side, causing him to double over and shove his forehead into the ground. Gasping for breath, he waited for it to pass to a more tolerable level, and slowly looked up and around. In the dark, he saw nothing, and cursed.

How could she be so stupid? He had fed her even, and she still ran away? Thinking of the rations suddenly, his head snapped in their direction and saw that they were untouched. If she had been smart, she would have taken them with her. No, something wasn't right.

Against any expectations, he reached out for her, looking for that familiar thread, and tugged. She was close. Very close. Gathering what was worth taking into one of the gang's canvas sacks, he slung it over his shoulder and slowly made his way in her direction, ranting in his head at her the entire time. *Stupid, stupid girl!*

He felt her presence as he got closer, and in the starlight he could just make out her form. She was stumbling just a short way ahead of him, and he watched as the toe of her boot caught into a particularly deep crack in the ground and she tumbled forward and fell into the dust. He could feel the exhaustion radiating off of her, because it was his exhaustion, too. As he got closer, he glared down at her. She didn't get up.

"Scavenger," he growled, prodding her with his boot. "Scavenger," he tried again. He pressed against her mind and found it utterly blank.

"Rey," he hissed, hoping she would respond to her own name, but it was no good.

He cursed again and knelt down carefully beside her, desperate not to anger his side, and he rolled her over to pull her face out of the dirt. He sighed. Looking up at the sky, the night was still early and it was already freezing. All evidence of the camp was gone from his periphery- there was no point in going back.

Stretching out on the ground beside her, he tucked the sack between his knees and carefully, with only a slight whimper, eased himself down. He lay there, on his back, staring up at the stars and mildly catching his breath before turning to look at her. Face caked with dirt, he brushed a finger against her grime-streaked cheek. His breath caught and shuddered in his chest. Turning carefully towards her, he reached out and wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled, dragging her towards him, and tucked her close against his chest. *It's warmer this way,* he mumbled to himself.

His gloved hand ghosted around her form as he yanked at what was left of his cowl from around his neck and draped it over their heads before leaning close to her, her head tucked carefully under his chin. He closed his eyes and sighed.

Tonight, maybe, with reasonably full stomachs, they could actually sleep.

—

Rey felt something unfamiliar yet warm against her as she squirmed, but when she cracked open her eyes and tried to pull away, nothing could have prepared her for what she saw. They were covered over, by something similar to what his tunic was made from she assumed, and starlight filtered through the sheer fabric to light his serious expression hovering just above her head. She slowly pushed against him but it was like budging rock- his arm was wrapped hard around her.
Escape was impossible.

She sighed. Gaining for herself a least a couple of inches to arch back and look at him, she tried pressing against his mind but found him very soundly asleep. His face was set into a deep frown.

Of course he'd look like that even when asleep, she thought, exasperated.

As she watched him, she felt his expression become contagious as her face soon mirrored his own. She was so tired, and the last thing she remembered had been the attack…and there had been food. She found her fingers unknowingly toying with the fringes of his tunic as she struggled to remember.

Kylo fed us.

She saw it again and remembered what she had allowed, his mind compelling her to eat when she thought she didn't have the strength. The first taste of water in days. How had she drunk it? He held you up, she heard herself remember.

Rey felt mildly horrified and she let her head drop to the side against the ground.

Desperation really makes strange bedfellows of people. She felt the corner of her lip twitch in ironic amusement.

It was as far as she could allow herself to think into it all right now, but as her eyes flickered up once more to his face, she felt her breath stop as the thin scar that ran from the center of his forehead, down his nose, and across his cheek caught the filtered starlight and shone almost white against his skin. Her eyes widened.

My work. I did that.

She forced herself to breathe again, and when she did, the breaths came slow but heavy. Unsure of just what she was intending, she cautiously wiggled free an arm and her hand hovered over his face. She felt her pulse quicken, and she questioned strongly the curiosity compelling her, but the urge was almost overwhelming. Careful not to disturb the canopy billowing above them, she gently rested two fingertips on his forehead and slowly, lightly traced along the edge of the mark. She found herself mesmerized despite herself. As her fingers fell to his lower cheek, he flinched, stirring in his sleep, and she snatched her hand back from his skin like she had been burned and stifled a gasp.

Her eyes snapped to his mouth as his lips pursed briefly, but in a moment he was still again, still asleep. She exhaled, relief flooding through her. Biting the side of her tongue, she slowly pulled her hand back, but as she did, she found her fingertips inadvertently brush along his unmarred cheek and stared as his brow smoothed. The scowl was gone, and in its place came an expression decidedly more peaceful.

Rey blinked. None of this is right, she felt herself thinking over and over again, but as she watched him, she decided, at least for tonight, she wasn't in any danger. At least for tonight she'd eaten, had her fill of water, wasn't completely freezing…

At that thought, she instinctively found herself curling into his chest, and although she hated herself for it, pressed her forehead against him.

He was warm. She was exhausted. And as she felt herself slip much too easily into sleep tucked inexplicably close to her nemesis, she repeated At least for tonight…at least for tonight…..just for tonight…..
Well...is it what you expected? We're not done yet, though. I rewrote the ending of this one a couple of times and I'm rather pleased how it came out (at least compared to what it was), but I'm already a ways through the next chapter and let me just say...let us not forget how hot and cold Kylo can get. He is the definition of 'triggered' to outrageous extremes. Nothing seems to last very long with him...and remember the only one armed right now is Rey. >:3

The response last chapter was *insane*. THANK YOU to icybae, Allison, nareno, 13oct, RensGirl, Chaiiii, missjewels, Shadow1, Karla, midnightplanets, All_The_Feels, and GotMyInvite for absolutely blowing me over with your generous comments. Thank you all so, so much. I literally fall over myself whenever I get email alerts and drop everything to see what you guys have to say.

Thanks to absolutely everybody for reading and see you at the next chapter~
Rey awoke first and a high midday sun burned bright above them but somehow, beneath Kylo's cowl, it didn't seem that hot. Her eyes felt dry and it took several blinks before they would moisten and she could pull her vision into focus. His arm was still clenched tightly around her, and as she leaned back to look up at him, she found him with the same calm expression he'd had before she decided it was alright to fall asleep.

She felt well-rested and she couldn't explain it to her satisfaction. Was it because she had eaten? Finally had had water? It didn't matter. What mattered was leaving. She pulled both her arms free and shoved hard against his chest, trying to pry free from his arm. He was strong despite suffering the same deprivations as she had and she bared her teeth as she pushed. Just as she was beginning to wiggle free, she felt his muscles tense and her cheek was suddenly shoved against his chest as he pulled her back.

"In a hurry?" he slurred, voice rough with sleep.

Rey's eyes widened and she felt a surge of adrenaline flare through her as he spoke. Her fingers clenched against him.

"It's midday and I need to keep moving," she mumbled back. She heard him huff and pulled her head back to see a half smile pulling at his mouth while his eyes remained closed.

"Something funny?" she said twitching her brow, edge coming into her voice. He frowned slightly, the look contrasting strangely, Rey thought, with the expression still on his lips.

"Don't you mean 'we' need to keep moving?"

Finally he cracked an eye and looked down at her. She seemed so tiny against him. Tiny and growing angry. He couldn't help himself- the other corner of his mouth flicked up to match the other.

"What is that look?" she insisted. Her teeth shone white against her burned and somewhat blistering skin. He said nothing, looking at her. "I don't need you," she continued into the silence.

"Ohh," he said, his face clearing, and he gave a rather smug, uncaring frown as he pushed his head back against the makeshift canopy. "I see. Then I guess the supplies I took from the gang that attacked you last night aren't needed either."

Her face was a full on scowl now, anger mixed with desperation flashing through her eyes. He
leaned in further to her.

"All the food..." he murmured, inching closer. "The burn salve..." He was inches from her face. "The water," he whispered, his brows briefly twitching together as his eyes drifted down to her cracked and bloodied lips.

She felt his breath on her face and fought to maintain her furious expression despite his close proximity, but when she noticed where he was looking she suddenly became very self-conscious and took her damaged lower lip into her mouth.

"How are you not burnt? Let me go at once!" she growled, pushing roughly away from him.

He rolled back giving in under her hands and laughed, his cowl falling down over his face.

"Shut up..." he heard her murmur, but he couldn't help himself. His own laugh genuinely took him by surprise and it made him laugh more.

He felt a tug around his knees which pulled his mind to the present and, thoughts clicking back into place, he flung away the fabric.

"Ah-ah!" he hissed, pointing at her. Her hand was gripped around the taught strap of the sack as she tried to pull it free from him. She scowled.

"Either we share or I leave you here with nothing," he said in a low tone. His previous amusement had vanished.

Rey looked into his eyes and her determination faltered. She could fight him for it. She could try. But her rational mind told her, as much as she hated it, that she wouldn't win. Not in this state. And if they somehow ran into any other hostile parties out here....maybe he could actually serve some purpose.

Kylo watched her carefully as she decided what to do, his knees tightening around their only provisions, and he silently prayed she would just accept his offer so they could be done with it. Slowly, her fingers loosened and she pulled away, standing against the bright azure sky.


He propped himself up carefully on his elbows and lifted his knees, and therefore the sack, within his reach and grabbed it before slowly rolling over. He gingerly pushed back onto his knees and lifted himself to his feet. Rey watched in silent concern but said nothing.

*If he's that seriously injured, it doesn't look good for us,* she thought, and instantly Kylo's eyes flashed hard on her, his jaw rigid.

"It's nothing. You don't need to concern yourself," he bit at her, and he slung the strap of the sack around his shoulder and slowly began to walk away, actively suppressing a grimace. Rey stood there staring at him and clenched her teeth.

"Stop reading my mind!" she shouted after him. "And do you even know where you're going?"

She bounded up behind him and had to stop herself from hitting his back as he suddenly halted. He turned on his heel and looked down at her.

"You seem to have been focused enough to find the group that gave us these provisions," he said levelly, nudging the sack. "Maybe you should do it again."
Rey glared up at him, glared at the sack, and looked back at him again.

"I could try," she conceded with a frown, and he nodded at her.

Slowly she closed her eyes and she focused. She felt for the Force and was nearly overwhelmed when for a moment all she could feel was him. She shook her head absently and tried to push up barriers, blocking him out. Maybe I can still make this work, she thought, finally feeling some modicum of privacy. Maybe I can still get us to the base. If it's even here.

She tried to relax, and she reached with as much willpower and focus she could muster, and as precious sweat began to break out along her brow, she felt the sharp, poignant shock of life, lots of life, off, ironically, in the same direction that Kylo had been headed. She wasn't sure what was out there, but it was definitely something, and more than just the small gang had been.

She opened her eyes and found him looking her over with what Rey could only label as fascination.

"What?" she asked, quirking up a brow. He blinked rapidly, pulling back a bit.

"Nothing," he said, clearing his throat. Rey looked at him again briefly before pushing past him.

"You were headed the right way, actually. There's a large swarm of life in that direction," she said pointing.

Kylo followed her finger, straining to look into the horizon. Seeing nothing, he looked back at her a little skeptically but nodded.

"Alright," he conceded, and he reached up around his neck, pulling at his clothing.

"What are you doing?" she asked, stepping away from him. He arched a brow as he finally tugged it free.

"Helping you. You're burnt to a crisp," he said, tossing his cowl at her. "Wear that around you. It'll block out the sun."

She caught the semi-sheer black fabric in her hands and absently ran her fingers over it.

Meanwhile, Kylo dropped the sack with a thud, wrenched it open, and began riffling through its contents. Rey squinted at him.

"How is black fabric going to block out the sun?" she asked.

He didn't look up but shoved an arm deeply into the canvas. "It's a special fabric. I had it commissioned myself," he said, and when he pulled his arm free he held his helmet in his hand.

Rey sighed and her posture slumped in annoyance. "Oh, you're not really going to wear that, are you?"

Kylo looked up at the burning sun, made a face, and wiped vigorously at his forehead and cheeks, clearing it of as much sweat as he could. "You wear that, and I'll wear this. When night falls again we can see just how effective these salves are. Until then, we need to keep the sun off of us as much as possible."

Tossing back his hair, much to Rey's quiet amusement, he slid the helmet over his head and turned towards her.

"Ready?" came the clipped, modulated voice.
Rey involuntarily shuddered and then noticed his grip tighten around the sack. Running her hands across the fabric one last time, she lifted it up and made a hood for herself over her head. The coolness of the shade hit her almost instantaneously and, encouraged by this, she pulled it down further in front of her face.

"Yes," she said, and when he slung their supplies back around his shoulder, they walked.

They trudged along in silence for what seemed like forever, and the sun continued to burn high above them. Sometimes Rey skipped ahead, and sometimes Kylo took the lead, ever mindful of the direction Rey pointed them in. She pulled his cowl further over her head, and occasionally rearranged it to fall over her shoulders or to try and shield her arms. She wondered if the same sun-blocking ability was built into the rest of his clothing. When a rather ghastly hot and dust-filled wind blew up around them, she pulled the edge of it up around her nose and mouth to keep out the sand and inhaled a rather musky, earthy scent that contrasted starkly with the barren landscape stretched around them. She frowned slightly, but as the wind blew through again she tugged it closer and concluded somewhere in the back of her mind that the smell must somehow be him.

After the wind blew through, the heat rose sharply and Rey even saw Kylo begin to struggle with it.

"I'm fine," the modulated voice turned to bark at her, and Rey curled her lip, bringing up the edge of the cowl to wipe the sweat from her forehead.

"I told you to stop reading my mind," she shot back. She heard a strange hiss of white noise come from him.

"Then just say what you have to say instead of thinking you're doing me a favor by keeping silent."

She arched a brow. "I didn't think you'd be the type for conversation."

"I'm not," he replied quickly.

Silence. Kylo continued to stomp onward and Rey trailed just a few paces behind, watching the way his shoulder blades moved with the swing of his arms.

"We should pause here," he said suddenly, and dropped the sack with a thud.

Rey stopped a few paces behind him. Although they had agreed to get through this together, the image he presented, helmet and all, still spurred such a fight-or-flight reaction in her that she couldn't really bring herself to come closer. He pulled the canvas open and began searching through it.

"You know," the mechanized voice began, "for someone burnt to a crisp, you really do seem to spend a great amount of time concerning yourself with others when you should be more concerned with yourself."

Rey shifted on the hard ground and pulled back her head in annoyance. "And why shouldn't I be concerned? If you decide you can't go anywhere, we'll be stuck here forever, dying in the wastes, because you won't part with the supplies."

He said nothing as his hand pulled out a metal canister and he tossed it to her. Catching it easily, she unscrewed the top, sniffed it cautiously, and held it up to her lips. She took a long draught of water into her mouth. Swallowing, she looked at him narrowly and tossed the canister back.
"What's wrong with you anyway? Injured from your own self-induced crash landing?" she said with a bitter smile.

She watched as his fingers plucked at the release on his helmet and he pulled himself free. His face was completely dry although a little flushed and she found herself secretly jealous. Dropping it to the ground, he grabbed at the canister and flung it open.

"I told you to forget about it," he said giving her a pointed look, and Rey could almost feel his efforts to reel in his tone.

He poured a bit of the water down his throat before hastily replacing the top and tossing it back into the sack.

"You know," she began this time, "We wouldn't even be in this mess if you hadn't crashed us," she said quietly, but as she looked off into the featureless distance she could feel the frustration welling up in her. For the past couple days she hadn't had space to react to what he'd done to them, but now that her mind had cleared it seemed easy to feel angry. When she looked back at him, he was glaring at her.

"No," he spat, eyes widening. "You'd be dead," and he cinched the bag in one swift movement. Her eyes burned into his.

"You don't know that! I don't see how you can be so confident about anything after what you've done. I cannot even begin to fathom," she continued, stepping closer to him, "what went through your mind to think that slamming your ship onto mine and stranding us here was ever a good idea! Why are you even here?! And why are you alone? Where are your First Order lackeys anyway?"

She found herself toe to toe with him now, fuming, as he glared down at her with shaky breaths. She wasn't sure how it was possible but he took a step closer, bending over her smaller form, and loomed, nearly casting a shadow. His face sneered down at her. "And how do you know, scavenger," he said in a low growl, "that my 'lackeys' aren't right behind us? How do you know I won't take you in a second back to my ship and keep you until you're spilling the narration of your entire life into my hands until you give up Skywalker's location?" His lip curled. "How do you know this hasn't been my plan all along?"

Rey's breath caught in her throat and she backed away from him, face distraught. "You forget that I've seen into your mind as well!" she shot back, sounding a bit more desperate than she had intended. Her teeth bared under her makeshift hood. "I know you're alone. That you have no one!"

His expression faltered slightly.

"What I don't know is why!" she shouted. He said nothing, merely stared at her determined to hold on to his composure but her words were grating at him and he could feel a familiar fire building up inside. I will not let her get to me...

Rey scoffed. "What was actually your plan here, Kylo? Kill me? Because you've already carried me off once. Or did you intend to just kill us both when you slammed your ship into mine?"

Kylo's lip twitched sporadically as he fought to hold onto himself but she was making it very, very difficult. She stared at him, waiting for answers, and all he could do was stare back, afraid that if he spoke it would come out in a scream. His hand reflexively clenched around his broken lightsaber, desperate for some sense of control. He watched as her expression fell, her eyes falling to his hand and she began to back away, much to his confusion.
Reaching to her belt, she unclipped her saber.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his expression blank.

"If you want to fight..." she said, a tremor in her voice.

"What?" he said, and when he followed her eyes he saw his fingers curled around the ruined hilt. Another souvenir, he contemplated glumly, that she left him after their last encounter. He let it go, allowed it to hang once again from his side, and he looked back at her.

*She doesn't know*, he thought. *She thinks I'm still armed.* Inwardly, he smiled, and straightened up, extending a hand towards her.

"Some practical things for you to consider," he began in an even, almost methodical tone. His control started to return to him as his eyes locked onto her hers. "Firstly, any attempt by you to engage me will result in one or both of us likely grievously injured if not dead. Secondly, and I think you know this, we are more likely to survive this ordeal together."

Silently she listened, and when he was finished, she stared into his wide eyes and barked out a laugh. He leaned back. "And why shouldn't I just take the supplies by force? You're already injured- it should be a fairer fight," she sneered, her grip tightening on her saber's hilt.

Pausing, he raised his brows. "It would then be the second time you've fought me injured, and with that train of thought you should seriously reconsider your allegiances."

She stared at him in shock. "I am nothing like you!" she shouted, waving her deactivated weapon at him. "Don't you dare even begin to suggest it."

She chanced a few steps closer, her pride reeling from his words. She hardly knew him, and yet she was convinced she had seen the absolute worst he was capable of. The suggestion that she could even be remotely the same tore at her heart the same way the planet's sun was tearing at her skin and the pain she felt shone in her eyes.

"You are the murderer, the one who takes advantage of the weak. You are the one who has stalked my every waking moment since I met you! You!" she continued with an uneasy laugh. "You killed your father!" she declared as she shook her saber hilt at him, the word catching in her throat with the emotion. A father, a thing she had hardly ever had, and it still stabbed deeply into her that anyone would choose to throw away theirs. "You destroyed an entire system containing billions of people! And for what?"

Kylo listened to her in stunned silence. A very small part of him in the back of his mind couldn't believe she was doing this now, of all times and places, but the rest of him was still locked in shock. "Starkiller was Hux's toy, not mine," he said steadily, correcting her, but she threw up her hands in exasperation.

"Who?" she bellowed. "You were still there, part of it!"

"No. I was—"

"It doesn't matter!" she interrupted, screaming, and he could see the tears that rimmed her eyes. "I found peace, somehow, still, after everything," she smiled bitterly, "until you came barging back into my mind. And now look at us," she said, waving at the cracked earth surrounding them.

He was reeling, trying and partially failing to take her words in. They hit his mind like physical blows and each one seemed to cut into him deeper than the last. The anger, no, *fury*, was positively
radiating off of her now, and while his instincts told him to watch out for her lightsaber the rest of him was feeding off of her energy, allowing it to stoke the fires of his own emotions as well.

"Tell me," he began carefully, slowly shifting his thoughts into place. Rey was seething but instinctively stepped back as his posture suddenly changed into something more languid than she thought his broad form was capable of. "do you sleep at nights?" he asked her, tilting his head slightly to the side.

Rey frowned at him, her eyes locked onto his, not noticing as he stepped closer. "What?"

"Because I haven't slept soundly in fifteen years." His eyes became wild as he looked at her, and as her expression faltered, he felt a spike of pleasure pass through him witnessing the tiny crack she betrayed. "What I wouldn't give," he continued, "To be a nothing little nobody, tucked away on some desert, with nothing to worry about except water and rations and ship parts."

He stalked closer, her face contorted in a mix of confusion and utter incomprehension at what he was saying.

"Ohh, how much simpler," he groaned, and he grasped her shoulders, causing her to jump, "when instead all I hear at night is screaming."

Rey looked up at him in horror. "All the people you've killed?" she tried to supply nonchalantly with an upward twist of her lip.

"No," he said softly, shaking his head, and his hair brushed down over his cheek. His thumbs caressed her shoulders and she tried to pull away from his touch. "It's the force," he whispered finally, staring down into her eyes. "And you…" he continued, allowing one of her shoulders to pull away and choosing instead to bring up a crooked finger to brush against her filthy cheek. "I know you've had nightmares, too."

"You're insane," she hissed at him, and he laughed quietly in response.

"Probably. Very likely," he acquiesced, eyes widening as his gaze traced over her face. "But you cannot deny it. I've seen it myself these past few nights. Your nightmares scream out to anyone who will listen. Who can listen."

He moved his hand to cup her chin lightly as she stared defiantly up at him and his gaze returned to meet hers. "I can hear them," he whispered, swallowing hard. His chest tightened as some foreign emotion moved him and caused his brow to flicker as he looked at her. "And if you told me that even in that time you claim you found peace that your dreams were peaceful also, I wouldn't believe you."

Rey gasped and jerked herself away from him.

"You stay away from me," she growled, backing away.

He gazed after her. "Rey…"

"No!" she shouted, the anger coming back to her. "Don't you dare say my name!"

And, spinning on her heel, she took off towards the horizon.

Kylo's eyes narrowed as he watched her run. "Rey?" he called after her. When she didn't respond, he cursed loudly.
"REY!" he screamed. Slamming his toe into the parched ground he shrieked violently as he struck it over and over again. In a complete fury he spun around, and when he saw the only other thing in sight, the large sack of supplies, he turned on it viciously and smashed his foot into it again and again as his voice cracked under his vocal exertion. On the third pass, his breath heaving, he snatched up the bag, threw his helmet inside of it, and turned his eyes on her quickly fading form.

Baring his teeth, he slung the supplies over his shoulder and he ran. He ran straight for her. He pulled the force close, muffling his approach, and when he reached her, a pain ripped through his entire being causing him to barrel into her. The last thing he was able to will himself to do was wrap his arms around her as he fell, hard, onto the dry ground, cushioning her fall as she rolled out of his arms.

"What in the—!" she bellowed, pushing up quickly on all fours, but when she turned to rail at him further, she found him out cold and something dark, darker than his robes, and wet, soaking through his side.

Rey frowned and, approaching him slowly, waved a hand in front of his face. She pushed at his mind with her own, and when she found him thoroughly unresponsive, she crept closer to hover over his torso and carefully swipe a finger over the growing mass spreading through his clothing. When she pulled back and looked at her fingertips, she gasped.

"Kylo?" she called warningly. Grabbing the front of his robes, she tugged at him, rocking his massive form. "Kylo, you're bleeding. You need to get up."

Quickly, without thinking about the who or the what, she unlatched his belt and began tugging at his tunic, trying to figure out its construction so she could pull it away and assess the damage. Settling with pushing it up and over his abdomen, Rey took one look at the festering wound and recoiled, covering her mouth in a desperate urge not to be violently sick. Red tendrils emanated from the large, gaping wound and the smell of acrid infection was overpowering.

"Kylo!" she choked out again, coughing. When he didn't respond, she reached for his wrist, pushing back his sleeve, and felt for a pulse. In the heat of the desert, suddenly, she felt like ice. She could feel nothing. Eyes wide, she called his name again and yanked at his neck guard, concluding he really was too swamped in layers as she desperately flung two fingers at his jugular and pressed hard enough to bruise. Faintly, a throbbing revealed itself beneath her fingers. She nearly collapsed on top of him with relief.

"Haaa," she wheezed out. "Ok, Kylo!" she said to the unresponsive heap, chippering up. Rising to her feet, she struggled to pull the sack's strap off of his arm and roll his body, much heavier than it looked, off of their supplies. Her face snarled as she pulled it out from under his leaden frame and, once it was free, yanked it open and started to paw through it. She glanced at Kylo as she searched and noticed small beads of sweat begin to collect on his brow. Looking up at the sun, her hand hit upon a small, cylindrical container and she yanked it free and dove in again for a water canister. Shuffling back to his side, she pulled his tunic up further, careful of the edges of the infection, and opened the water. Her fingers toyed with the edge of his cowl draped over her head before pulling it off and glaring when the heat hit her almost immediately. She glanced at the sun again and huffed.

Just a couple more hours until nightfall, she tried to comfort herself, and began to wash Kylo's wound.

"I have no idea how you got this," she said to him, knowing he couldn't hear her. It didn't stop her anyway.
"I mean, you didn't say you were injured in the crash, but even then, this doesn't exactly look like a wound you'd get from a crash."

She was judicious with the water, but given the extent of the damage, she began to resign herself to the fact that it would probably use up the entire canister. She sighed.

"You know what this looks like?" she said, clearing away a particularly nasty section of puss from the edge of it. "This looks like…"

She stopped, and her hands froze mid action.

_This looks like a wound from a bowcaster._

Kylo, in the snow, beating on his side and staring at her with crazed eyes flashed before her. During her time with the Resistance, she'd seen Chewbacca's weapon in action numerous times, and although she'd only really gotten to see the result of its formidable firepower from a distance, its blast pattern was pretty distinct. What gaped at her fingertips now, oozing from the side of Kylo Ren, was a very similar but neglected wound.

"How..." she began. "This shouldn't be!" she frowned in disbelief. She couldn't fathom how he'd managed to survive with it untreated all this time, how it wasn't healed already since it hadn't killed him. Shaking herself out of her reverie, she furrowed her brow and continued her work in silence.

When she was satisfied, cleaning him up as much as she could with nothing but water, she did her best to wash out the fabric and grabbed up the small container at her knee. Twisting it open, a rather unappetizingly yellow-colored transparent paste was inside.

"I don't have anything else, I'm afraid," she murmured to him. "So the burn salve will have to do…"

Taking a large glob of it in her fingers, she sucked in a breath. As her fingers made contact with his skin, she felt a strange buzz pass through her as she began to slather on the ointment and she flinched when she saw his stomach twitch, her eyes drawing suddenly to his well-defined torso. He was muscular like herself, but unlike her lean form, she realized, chiseled from lithely bounding through shattered ships, he was nearly twice her girth of carefully honed flesh. Realizing that caused a bit of her trepidation from before to seep back into her mind. He twitched twice more under her touch, his stomach flexing, and slowly her feeling was replaced with something akin to respect and her mind started to wander as she worked, thinking over the practice routines she would do with Master Luke and wondering what his were.

Halfway through and he seemed to still. As he relaxed, so did she, and she quickly finished up slathering on the salve, spreading it beyond the wound itself to its insidious-looking tendrils of infection as well. With a huff of satisfaction, she grabbed at the cowl, pulled it through her fist to stretch it length-wise, and looked back to him.

"This would be a lot easier if you were awake," she said with a flick of her brow, and stood up until she had one leg on either side of his prostrate form. Taking in a breath, she grabbed at his unaffected side, fingers digging into his flesh, and tried to roll him over a bit to tuck the fabric behind his back. She glanced now and then at his face for a reaction but still he remained unresponsive. Shoving it as far beneath him as it would go, she let his back fall back against the ground and readied herself for the other side.

"I apologize for this ahead of time," she said, raising her brows. "Or maybe I don't. It's not like you didn't deserve this wound."
She snickered lightly and, careful to avoid the damaged area, pulled him over when a moan escaped his throat.

"Has to be done!" she said in a sing-song voice, shoving her hand under him to grab at the fabric end. Pulling it back out, she emerged victorious, easing him down.

She dusted off her hands. "Just a couple more passes to go!"

She wasn't certain how Kylo hadn't awoken as he continued to unconsciously protest every time she shifted him to wrap the fabric as a makeshift bandage. It took some time, but once complete, she tied the ends together and slumped back onto the ground, exhausted. The only upside Rey could see was that that sun was finally setting and soon, she'd be asleep.

Deciding there was nothing more she could do with Kylo, she let him lay there as she ploughed through their supplies, taking inventory of everything, and cursing as she found only three canisters of water left, their fourth wasted on washing his wounds. Silently she glared at him as she took up a firestarter and a cooking pan, and bitterly thought that at least the trade-off meant she could continue to have something to be mad at out here. She searched for the portable range to set it on, but the one she found was impossibly bent, the middle of it twisted inward, and she tossed it aside. Cooking up some quick rations for herself, she cleaned up, cinched up the supply sack, and stared up at the stars in the lingering light of the dying firestarter.

"….Rey?"

Her eyes snapped towards her patient. "He lives," she said flatly.

"What…?" he weakly said, rolling his head against the ground.

"I don't know, but I find it hard to believe you've been walking around with that bowcaster wound in your side for months."

She watched as his face slackened. "That doesn't make any sense. I haven't."

She scoffed, nodding in the direction of her work. "That's not what the wound I spent the evening dressing says. You were positively rife with infection. Probably still are…” she concluded, voice dropping off. She picked absently at a pebble she held between her fingers and glanced back up at the sky.

Kylo craned up his neck to try and see, struggling to prop himself up on his elbows as a cry escaped his throat. Rey's eyes snapped to glare at him.

"If you ruin my work," she warned, "you can very well do it all again yourself!"

Kylo warily shook his head. "No, no…” he muttered, lifting up his tunic and looking down at his side swathed in the fabric of his hood. He sighed and jerkily lowered himself down again, panting.

She eyed him warily but some how his current state brought out the more practical side of her, the survivor's side, and silently she embraced it because things were so much simpler that way. She pursed her lips. "Are you hungry?"

He rolled his head against the ground in a semblance of 'no' and she nodded back in reply.

"Sleep it is then," she said, and tossed herself down, snuggling up to the supply sack as the fire sputtered out and the night's cold tugged at her.
"Rey?" she heard him call.
"Yes?"
"..."

She shifted her head up and away from the sack to look at him. "Yes?" she insisted.
".....thank you."

She huffed, and a small smile tugged at her lips. "You're welcome," she replied, and plopped her head back against the lumpy sack.

The light of the stars and nearby planets shone down on them and the silence of the barren planet was deafening. The sound of every movement she made seemed amplified by 100, and she was especially aware when she heard him shifting nearby.

"Are you cold?" he called to her.

Rey clutched the bag in her fingers, brushing her forehead against it. "Why?" she asked finally.
"Because it's warmer if we….if we...." she heard him sigh and closed her eyes.

"Promise me you won't try and snatch away the supplies," she ordered, edge to her exhausted voice.

"I don't know what I could do with them in this state anyway," he argued, and she squeezed her eyes in exasperation.

"Promise me!" she insisted. She waited.

"I promise," he replied quietly.

Rey looked over at him seriously for a moment before pushing to her feet and dragging the sack behind her. Walking over to his good side, she let the supplies drop as she sunk down next to him and edged up to his side, tucking her admittedly freezing hands between their bodies. He lifted up his arm and tucked it around her and her head rose to rest naturally on his shoulder. As his fingers curved around her waist, she felt a chill pass through her and in response he pulled her closer.

He rolled his head towards her. "Thank you," he murmured again, saying it against her hair.

"It's nothing," she replied, and as the timidity of such close proximity slowly wore away, she pushed herself closer, desperate to get warm.

"But how did it get like that?" she continued. Curiosity tugged at her fiercely and she felt his chest rise and fall with a silent sigh.

"It had healed. Or rather....." Kylo's eyes drifted off into the black sky above, his eyes narrowing as his mind played back the Supreme Leader's fingers curling around his side as he healed him with the Dark side of the Force, and he shuddered against her, bringing up his other hand to brush it against her face. That such power had somehow come undone...that it hadn't even really healed him....Rey, in this moment, suddenly became a talisman to him. She frowned, swallowing hard.

"Or rather what?" she asked, glancing up at him. Her instincts told her to brush off his hand but it was warm against her cold cheek so she let it linger as she stared at him.
"The Supreme Leader," he began, tilting his head to look down at her as he spoke. "He healed me. The scar had been black. But it seems…"

His eyes drifted again and she watched, waiting for him to go on. He snickered. "It doesn't matter," he concluded, turning his face away from her.

"It came loose somehow? Whatever he did, I mean."

"Maybe."

Rey frowned. She looked down at his covered torso. "I washed it. It was festering. Used up a whole canister of water. And used the burn salve as it was all I had."

When she looked back up, she found him staring down at her. His eyes seemed glassy in the starlight, and although the world was cast in shades of black and white in such light, there was a tinge of red to his face as his brows briefly met.

"Thank you," he breathed. She stared up at him, eyes captured by his and unable to look away. It was the third time he'd said it. Never in her wildest dreams did she think he was capable of thanking anybody, let alone doing it three times in such a short span of time. She huffed again and tilted her face down, choosing instead to burrow into his shoulder.

"Say that again and I'll start mistaking you for a person, Kylo Ren."

She felt his low laugh rumble up from his chest as his arm pressed her close and quickly, she fell into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience, guys. I'm too tired to write anything proper other than you're all incredible and I hope you like this bit of angsty fluff because you've all deserved it!!! And while I literally am unable to proofread till tomorrow, again, I appreciate your tolerance. (Everything is clean and finished!) I just really wanted to get a new chapter out to you guys asap.

A VERY special thank you to Karla, GotMyInvite, Huy, darklou91, shadow1, icybae, rachel_greatest, All_The_Feels, and chai for all of your kind and constantly encouraging reviews!! You know a I feed off of what you guys have to say as ACTUAL NOURISHMENT!! (I am really too tired to be writing this right now, but it's true!) So thank you guys SO MUCH, and thanks to everyone who's reading and subbed and kudo'd and all that amazing stuff because I don't deserve any of you. Thank you so much for enjoying this story.
Rey was surrounded by stars.

The fiery spheres of gently pulsating light hung as if suspended by strings and she could feel the Force wrapping itself around her. She sighed, contented. Never in her life could she remember feeling this sure, this balanced, and she lifted her arms to float about her in the space, feeling as the invisible presence that existed in all things nudged and brushed against her limbs. It seeped into her skin and she smiled. The stars grew brighter.

"Rey?"

Her head snapped towards her name as her arms slackened.

That voice…

She knew that voice, and instantly, in her perfect state, she willed herself to it, but the Force that had wound itself around her like a light, protective armor now seemed to suddenly weigh her down and her peace faltered.

"Rey?" it called again.

She struggled against it, brushing her hands up and down her arms as if to fling it off, but every time she tried she found she touched nothing but her own arm wraps and the sensation still lingered, holding her in place. She could not move. She could not go to it.

She strained her neck, trying to see past the bloating stars, see past the universe, and into the place where that voice called to her. Her mouth gaped and she began to pant under the effort. She could see nothing- only that which surrounded her- and she grit her teeth with a feral scowl.

"Where are you?" she cried into the lighted darkness, but the stars were gaining mass. It wouldn't be dark for long.

Her voice seemed to echo off of the expanding celestial objects, creating a cacophony of badly timed copies of her question that were flung back at her, assaulting her ears. She winced, and as she raised her hands to cover them, a lone, soft voice split through the din.

"We're so sorry, sweetheart….we love you…but you have to go."

Rey's eyes bulged and her hands grabbed suddenly at her ears. "What?!" she shrieked. "WHAT?!"

"We're so sorry….."

The voice drifted away from her but she was screaming now, screaming into the void filled with fat burning balls of gas and flame. They would touch and explode but it was meaningless to her because nothing would ever be be right, never again, and when she felt two large hands grip her shoulders the image before her eyes melted away at the edges and she felt herself land with a jolt.

"REY!" Kylo shouted, shaking her.

Her eyes flared open and when the first thing they took in was Kylo Ren, she tried to jerk away but he held her fast.
"Rey, stop!" he commanded. His eyes took on their wild sheen again but she was too far gone to care.

The stars….all she could see were the stars…..

She stared back at him blankly, eyes darting randomly trying to hold on to the image, and her breath came in shallow, hurried puffs, but he said nothing. When his fingers came up to brush at her cheek, she felt something wet there and wondered what he was doing to her until it hit her.

*I'm crying.*

Her mouth twisted and her eyes squeezed closed, and as her entire body shuddered, silently he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her into his chest.

He held her tightly and she screamed into him. Staring unfocused into the dim emptiness of the lifeless landscape, he let her, and brought up a hand to twist itself into her disheveled hair, holding her close, as if he could somehow absorb her cries of emotion into himself.

When she had finished, he didn't let go, but waited until she had stilled before speaking.

"What did you see?" he asked quietly. Rey shivered and he flinched slightly, but he was unrelenting in his embrace.

"What did you see?" he whispered.

He heard a sob when finally she pulled far enough away. Her face was red, and the dirt and dust that stuck to it now clumped and streaked across her small features.

"I saw…" she began, choking on the words as they came out. He waited. He could be patient.

She brought a hand up to her mouth and smeared more filth onto herself. Kylo sighed. Silently, he pushed her to sit while carefully, cautious of his side, he did the same. As she fought to gain control of her sobs, he grabbed their supply sack and began rummaging through it and quickly emerged with a canister of water. He gripped the top edge of the sack and ripped it around until he had torn away a good several inches and turned back to the dazed scavenger, then quickly opened the water canister to carefully pour a bit onto the canvas.

"What are you doing?" Rey frowned. "We can't waste water," she sniffed.

Kylo smirked. "You're in a state and still somehow manage to be practical."

Rey looked at him in confusion as he turned back to her. Raising his chin with a rather imperious air, he rested his fingers lightly against her cheek, and with the wet cloth in his other hand began to wipe away the dirt from her face. All she could do was stare at him as his eyes wandered over her and listen as he wasted more and more water on washing her.

"This isn't a priority right now," she mumbled as he worked to free a bit of grit caked into the corner of her mouth.

"It is for me," he replied casually, applying a bit more water.

"Why?" she asked flatly.

Clearing his throat, his eyes briefly met hers. "What did you see?" he asked again.
Rey tensed as Kylo began on her chin, wiping on the underside of her jaw.

"I heard my parents."

"Oh?" he replied back conversationally.

"I think they're dead."

Kylo's hand froze and hovered over her left cheek. Rey watched as his face, which from afar would have looked unchanged, underwent a whole series of tiny expressions in the dim light she had never seen expressed before on another human being. Rey found herself repeating her thoughts about what was surely his repressed capacity for feeling from a few days before as she saw his eyes briefly narrow before returning to the way they were before. Resting his fingers on her chin, he tilted her head to the side to allow him better access and resumed his task.

"Are you sure?" he asked. She could hear the forced control in his voice as he spoke to her.

"Yes," she replied simply. "I think they've been dead for some time."

She watched as his lips imperceptibly pressed together until her view was obstructed by his hand rubbing at her forehead and the rough cloth brushing against her nose. She sighed heavily, sending the tail of the material fluttering.

Kylo dropped his hand, tossed the cloth into his lap, and went back into the sack. He was shoulder deep before he pulled away with a small canister.

"What's that for?" she asked, eyeing it nervously. She could still feel the oily goopiness of the salve between her fingers from the day before and really wasn't interested in revisiting the sensation.

"You're burned. Badly. Or did you forget?" he chided. Rey frowned.

"You are not using that on my face," she insisted quietly, and raised her hands to push his holding the container away. He pushed back.

"Rey..." he began. She sighed, shutting eyes in a show of frustration. "You don't have the cowl anymore due to this," he continued, motioning towards his torso, "And you're already in bad shape. There's a good chance that whatever this is also blocks the light from this planet's sun as well as heals."

Rey's distaste for the idea, and the concoction, was so strong that he could already feel the texture of the stuff between his own fingers through the fragile bond between them and he hadn't even opened the container yet. He glanced down, rolling the tin around in his palm.

"Either way," he said looking up at her. "The smart thing to do would be to try it."

She was silent, but he could feel her thoughts churning. Rey didn't want the salve. She wanted to think about her dream. About parents. Her parents. She fidgeted briefly before fingerling the hem of her pants. She wasn't interested at all in bothering with his science experiment. She was not a science experiment.

His brow flickered as he focused on her with a small shake of his head. "No," he replied to her unspoken thoughts. "you're not. But this isn't that. I think this will help."

"How many times do I have to say it until you understand? Stop reading my thoughts!" she yelled.
Kylo stared at her, mouth slightly agape, before he recovered and held up a hand. "Alright! Alright…fine," he said.

Rey glared at him, glared at his own scowl forming across his brow, and glared voraciously at the way he threw the tin into his lap instead of back into the sack.

"What are you doing now?" she demanded, grinding her teeth.

Kylo coolly arched a brow as he laid his palms against the ground and carefully shifted himself around to better face her. "I'm going to show you something," he replied with a wince, and took in a breath as the skin twisted around his wound.

"You look more like you're going to hurt yourself," she quipped dully and he looked up at her briefly before situating himself.

Dusting his hands off on his knees, he straightened up and his gazed locked onto hers. His face half shone in the light of the exoplanet and stars that hung in the sky, and as his broad shoulders relaxed, he rolled his jaw as he watched her.

"Come here."

"Why?"

"Just….come," he beckoned.

Rey's face tightened again but slowly she scooted towards him and they soon sat knees touching knees. For a time, they just stared at each other, the glow of the nighttime sky playing off of each others' features. Rey's eyes drifted towards the curl of his hair, and she wondered why she had never noticed the rather glaring shine it had before.

"Rey?" he said softly, and her eyes fell back to his.

"Yes?"

Rey swallowed in surprise. She hadn't meant for her tone of voice to match his, and as she looked at him his eyes took on an unfamiliar sheen and a spike of adrenaline shot through her.

"I'm going to show you something. Are you ready?" he asked gently. Rey angled her head away from him as the skepticism began to eat away at her, wondering what it could possibly be that he'd speak to her like that.

"What is it?" she asked warily. Slowly, he gave a slight smirk.

"You'll see."

She gave him a look a while longer before turning back grudgingly and nodding.

"Alright, what is it?" she said, trying to lighten the mood.

He nodded. "Just stay exactly….yes, there," he said, holding up his hand. "Exactly where you are."

Kylo closed his eyes and he focused. He reached out for the thing that connected them and when he found it, he was pleasantly surprised when it felt weightier in his grasp. No longer a slender thread, it was now something….he didn't pull but slid his mind against it, trying to reach Rey.

"Hmm, what are you doing?" she said nervously, feeling him.
"Don't," he warned. "It's alright. Please."

"I really don't want you in my head again," she said with a nervous laugh and he shook his head.

"It's not that," he assured her. "Well…not quite like that."

He felt her mood darken and his brow twitched. "You can help me, let me in, or we can do this the hard way. What would you like to do?"

He heard Rey scoff. "Doesn't sound like much of a choice…" she grumbled and his lip quirked.

"No," he admitted.

Then, he felt the barriers lower and he darted inside. Rey gasped.

"Apologies," he mumbled under his breath and quickly found what he was looking for.

"Rey, close your eyes," he said, and when she did, he opened his own. She took a sharp intake of breath and her hands grasped at her trousers.

"I can see—"

"DON'T open your eyes!" he chided, and her hands relaxed although her face did not.

"Am I…is this you?"

"You are seeing what I am seeing, yes."

He watched as she let go a long breath and even chuckled slightly. "This is bizarre."

He smirked. "A bit, isn't it?" he admitted. He watched her.

Rey shrugged. "So what now? What's the point of this?"

Kylo blinked, shaking his head almost imperceptibly, although Rey from her vantage point could tell, and he raised a hand to rest it against her chin. She tensed beneath his fingertips and he quirked a brow in annoyance.

"Aren't we past that yet?" he asked her, irritated.

"Dunno," she said, feigning a casual tone. "Are you still a calloused murderer bent on killing me and all my friends?"

Kylo snickered. "Is that it? But you should know by now that it's—"

"What's that?" Rey interrupted with a frown. Kylo's eyes widened.

"NO. Rey, not there, STOP!" he half screamed, and desperately struggled to regain focus inside of his own head as Rey attempted to prowl around beyond what he had intended her to. Eyes burning into her closed ones, he pulled his thoughts together, felt for her presence, and quickly fenced her in. She frowned.

"You're no fun," she pouted.

He huffed and, rougher than perhaps was necessary, grabbed her chin and yanked her head to the side, forcing the side of her face to shine full into the light of the night sky. Her jaw fell open.
"Do you see that?" he gritted out, and jerked her head more to get a better angle as his gazed traced over her dried and broken skin, angry and severely blistered from days of exposure to the planet's sun, and made sure to hover especially long over the scabs that dotted her face and collected around her nose. She swallowed hard.

"So it's that bad…" he heard a small voice finally eke out.

"Yes," he said sternly but quietly. She nodded in his grasp.

"Will you take the salve?" he insisted, the words coming out more like a statement of fact than a question, and he saw her lashes glisten with dampness.

"Yes," she nearly whispered, and instantly she felt herself pushed out of his mind and back fully into her own. She opened her eyes wide and took in a full breath even though her body had never been something she'd lost control of, only what she'd seen before her.

Kylo was already flinging open the tin with a growl and angrily thrust two fingers into it to scrape up the salve. Rey had little time to react as he moved his hand towards her and smeared a large portion of it across her cheek. She gasped, close to saying something, but as his eyes angrily flashed onto hers she thought better of it and instead pressed her lips tightly together. He spread it on thickly, and Rey swore it was out of some misplaced feeling of revenge. She watched him work in muted irritation for several moments.

"I can't believe you went through all that trouble just for this," she said finally.

"What?"

"The whole 'come here' and I've something to show you' routine," she mocked.

"What about it? What routine?" he glared at her again with annoyance. She huffed.

His eyes widened in surprise as she suddenly knocked his hand away and began rubbing the concoction on vigorously herself. Hand still caught in mid-air, Kylo watched as she smeared it eagerly onto her forehead, around her nose, and around her chin. Scraping off a bit of excess, she even rubbed some onto her equally maligned chest.

Kylo pressed his mouth awkwardly into a line. "Would you…" he began, holding out the tin to her.

The look she shot him would have made an ordinary man catch fire. "NO."

Kylo raised his brows and looked away, fumbling for the top and taking several tries before getting it on tight again. By the time he had secured it back into the sack, Rey seemed satisfied with her work and rather roughly flung herself back onto the hard ground on her side, tucking her arm under her hair with an angry sigh. Kylo watched her blankly for a moment before easing himself down to join her and rolling carefully onto his back.

He rolled his head to the side to look at her and felt amusement tugging at him as her closed eyes still flickered angrily under their lids despite the chill of the air causing the skin to prickle on her exposed upper arm.

"What else did you see?" he asked again. She sighed. "You said you heard them. Hear isn't seeing," he continued.

She shifted in her spot, bringing up her legs closer to her body before finally opening her eyes to look at him.
"Tell me why you're here without the First Order and I'll tell you," she challenged.

Kylo's eyes hardened. "I can't tell you that."

She raised both her eyes at that, knowing, expecting, that to be his answer and smiled pleasantly at him. "Well then I guess I can't tell you either."

Kylo felt his defenses rising and his lip twitched as thoughts of the First Order flooded him. Maybe she wasn't bluffing when she said she knew he'd come here alone, but she'd never know, could never know, that it had been because of her.

Rey frowned. "What was that?" she said, looking him over strangely.

His mind snapped back to her. "What are you talking about?" he asked sharply.

Rey said nothing, just watched him, and he turned away. He had to be more careful. Letting her in to show her her own neglected injuries had been too risky but he hadn't had the patience for trying to convince her without a mirror. He felt again, carefully, for the thing tying them together and felt at its new weightiness. He sighed and looked back at her warily. She was struggling valiantly to keep her teeth from chattering.

With a low growl he rolled to his side and, reaching a long arm around her back, dragged her to him which resulted in a small yelp from Rey.

"I'll get it on you!" she said, her voice partially muffled against him. "The stuff!"

"Who cares," he muttered, and as he felt her tuck her arms eagerly between them, desperate for warmth, he tipped himself towards her despite the risk to his side. He felt a shuddering sigh against his chest and looked down to grab at one of the front tails of his tabard and try to drape it over her.

"Is it colder tonight?" she asked shakily.

"I think so," he said, not paying attention, and his eye flickered downward to see her leg snake nearly under his. He watched, but did nothing despite the tightening in his stomach and he looked back at her smaller form huddled against him. He tucked his arm back around her.

"Sleep," he said against her hair, and when she finally did, he was relieved when he sensed nothing at all in her mind. Rey slept peacefully, free from nightmares and visions. He couldn't recall a time since they'd been on this planet where her dreams had been so blissfully silent and the urge overcame him to run his fingers through her hair but he didn't- he didn't want to disturb what little heat- what little comfort?- he was good for. Instead, he tucked his face against her hair, and with the scent of her drifting against his mind he, too, fell into eerily quiet slumber.

Chapter End Notes

UGH, not totally satisfied with this chapter, I've agonized over it for ages, but it's better that it just gets out so we can move on. We're back to regular sized chapters- sorry guys. But I expect longer ones will peek through more often now.

A Very, Very special THANK YOU to iceybae, Huy, rachel_greatest, DauntlessSubconscious, Allison, All_The_Feels, darklou91, Lynn, chai, Karla, and Jinga for your generous comments on the last chapter!! I literally live to hear from you
guys, and from all of you who read this crazy fic, to where I get glares at work because I'm too busy refreshing the email on my phone, hahaha. So yes, thank you guys, and to all of you who read and leave kudos and sub and all that good stuff. I'm so happy to have you all aboard.

Have a stellar holiday weekend, if you're into the bunnies, and see you next chapter. :3
Kylo awoke to a tingling in his side, which he ignored, and an otherwise rested demeanor. The sun hadn't yet risen to scorch the very skin off their bones again, and as he peered up and into the lightening sky, he felt a heaviness against his arm and found Rey curled against it, her body concave to his but with the skin of her bare legs pressed against him—one leg even tossed over them. Glancing at her sleeping face, he craned his neck up a little to inspect the situation before lowering himself back down again with a heavy sigh. His heart began beating faster as an idea pressed aggressively against his mind. Swallowing hard, his jaw fell open, and he stared up determinedly at a particularly bright star shining overhead. Eventually, though, he carefully lifted his knee, and using his other already captured leg as a guide, he slowly, excruciatingly so, lowered it down again to catch hers in between his in return. A hard breath pressed out of him and he squeezed his eyes shut. He'd wanted to do it the night before when she'd tucked in close against him but had held back. Somehow, though, during the space of the night, the idea had festered and he found himself no longer able to resist it.

He laid there, eyes closed, mouth agape, and he could feel the warmth of her bare leg seeping through the fabric. How long had it been since he'd been this close to another person? His memory was so messy that he couldn't recall, but he tried to. Instead as he tried to think back, he was met with a tangle of corpses behind his eyelids and his master's whispers. His master…and the din built up suddenly, like something was trying to break through.

When the pressure started to become too much, he shook his head, violently. Rey gasped beside him.

"What's wrong?" she instantly asked, wasting no time in sitting up and attempting to look around herself despite her eyes being closed. Her hair stuck up in odd directions and also to what remained of the salve on her face. Kylo stared up at her as she continued to dart about.

"Nothing," he said slowly. Rey, opening her eyes, looked down at him to find him gazing wide-eyed at her and she just eyed him back, in silence.

"Nothing," he said slowly. Rey, opening her eyes, looked down at him to find him gazing wide-eyed at her and she just eyed him back, in silence.

Finally, "Oh," she muttered simply, and as she tried to pull her legs to her, found that one of them was caught between Kylo's own. She tried to tug it free but her leg was still slow with sleep and his, she despaired, was too heavy. Rey felt a strange pang of awkwardness mixed with mild panic nag at her.

When she looked back down at Kylo to try and hint that maybe he should move, she found him still staring and she stilled.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You."

"What?"

Kylo shook his head with a slight flicker of a frown as he tried to get his thoughts in order and Rey gave another careful tug of her foot. Kylo, finally noticing, looked down and with a dull "Oh" of his own, moved his leg aside and Rey quickly pulled her knees into herself, hugging them as she
peered at him.

He gradually pushed himself up into a sitting position before scooting himself around to face her.

Rey pressed her knees further into her chest as his eyes traced over her. Something about the way he did it felt off-putting to her. It didn't feel dangerous, like before.

"Your face…" he began measuredly. He paused, and Rey raised her brows to prompt him to continue.

Kylo went to raise his hand before changing his mind, curling his fingers into his palm and dropping it back into his lap.

"Aside from a few marks, you seem to be mostly healed," he finished.

"Really?" she squeaked, her legs jumping free from her arms. He nodded to her hesitatingly, absorbing her reaction with a dazed confusion as his mind tried to process how a person could go from timid to pure, astonishing energy in zero seconds. She was on her knees now, hovering over him eagerly.

"Well come on then!" she piped up excitedly.

"What?" he asked, his mind still trying to catch up.

"Let me see!" she cajoled him, grinning eagerly.

"You mean…" he began, "how I showed you before?"

She nodded quickly and Kylo had to resist the urge to lean away from her. Her excitement seemed dangerous.

"There's no need," he said slowly, and although he felt her face somewhat fall, he reached for their supply sack and pulled free the salve tin, turning it upside down until the metallic bottom shone up at them, and he held it out to Rey.

"This is simpler," he insisted, cinching it closed again. "And you should use a bit more of it, for today," he mumbled under his breath.

He couldn't let her in again- especially not when she was like this. It was too risky, and somewhere in the very back of his mind he felt the breath of those whispers again…

Rey quirked a brow at him, unable to suppress the nagging disappointment that pulled at her, but as he glanced back at her questioningly, she held up the canister and gasped.

"That's…" she stammered. Her face looked greasy but otherwise whole- lightyears from what it had looked like just a few hours before. "That's faster than bacta!" she said in astonishment.

Kylo merely nodded. "It'll be interesting to see what that stuff is made of when we get back."

Rey's eyes froze on her reflection in the metal and her grip tightened, claw-like, around it. \textit{When we get back}. Where was back? And \textit{who's} 'back'? Rey's 'back', or Kylo's 'back'?

Kylo felt her sudden tension striking out at him and he regretted instantly his choice of words. He didn't mean to— what? Remind them that they were stranded out here? That at some point it would most likely end, forcing them to go their separate ways even though he'd said that he'd never—? Before Kylo could finish the thought, Rey put down the container and scooted towards him. He
looked at her in mild alarm.

"Move," she said, motioning obscurely with her hands.

"What?" he said, face twisted in disgruntled confusion.

"Remove," she corrected. "the tunic, the layers. I want to see."

Kylo stared at her dumbfounded. Looking up at him she pursed her lips and huffed in annoyance.

"If that salve did this," she said, pointing to her face and spelling it out for him, "I want to see what it did when I used it on your side."

He blinked rapidly for a few moments before his brain started shifting into gear. "Oh," he said again.

As he pulled away his belt, he realized that conversations with her were dangerously disarming. Even with whatever it was tying them, she was too unpredictable. She reacted on impulse. He smirked as he shuffled off his tunic, leaving him in a sleeveless undershirt— all black— and his arm guards, straps pulled across his chest and crossing behind at his back. She was impulsive. Like him.

As Rey watched him strip down, she found her eyes drawn to the slivers of skin showing through between the cut-off of his shirt and the tops of his guards. Although the space was small, she could make out the definition of his arms and for some reason found it hard to look away. She made an effort to swallow as she finally looked back at his face only to find him staring calmly back at her. This look she knew. It was almost identical to the first time she'd ever seen his face. That same, steady gaze he'd had when he first removed his helmet for her. For her? No, in front of her.

She blinked at him, but his expression never wavered, and when she saw, or perhaps felt, that he had no intention of moving further, she inched forward and carefully picked up the edge of his shirt with her fingertips and lifted. Pulling it back over his torso, she saw the makeshift bandage was still in place and looked up at him questioningly. He met her eyes with a slight smirk and he could feel her reflexive irritation at the gesture. She found it too familiar— too similar to the last time.

Gently he pushed her hand away and began tugging at the knot in his battered cowl. After a few grunts of frustration at struggling to undo it, much to Rey's satisfaction, he finally pulled it free and slowly began to unwind it.

"How did you manage this anyway? I never did ask," he muttered as he worked.

Rey shrugged. "Dunno, I… I just did," she said simply. He glanced up at her and she gave him the same nonplussed look before reaching the last layer and carefully peeling it away.

Rey's mouth gaped open and Kylo stared down at himself, genuinely disturbed. The once black scar, fused with the Supreme Leader's infinite powers— the scar that had failed and left him vulnerable and at the mercy of the woman who sat before him— now shone a stark white in the risen sun. Rey instantly leaned forward and brushed her fingertips against it and he hissed, flexing away from her hand at the unexpected contact.

"Does it hurt?" she asked quickly, looking up at him. He panted briefly before frowning and glancing up at her rather timidly.

"No," he insisted.
Rey said nothing, thinking. "I should have asked first, I—"

"No," he said rather loudly. He squeezed his eyes shut before looking down at her hovering hand again. "No," he said again quietly. "It's alright. It...doesn't hurt."

He looked up at her again, steadying himself. "Go ahead," he urged.

Rey was wary, but curiosity was winning out, and with one final glance, she slowly leaned forward and brushed the pads of her fingers against one of the outer tendrils of the twisted flesh. He reacted reflexively again, but this time kept silent, willing his body to still. Her skin was warm against the stiffened tissue as she traced along the edges, over the ridges and valleys that had formed on him in the wake of healing that had constantly been disrupted and disturbed. He studied her as she explored and soon she was done with the edges and was growing bolder as her fingertips came nearer to the center spread of his damaged side. She wasn't afraid. Or disgusted. Her face lacked any suggestion of such and her mind didn't let on in that direction either. He watched her blink, the way her eyes narrowed as they examined, learned, when the thought whispered to him: the display of the most egregious addition yet to his bruised and flayed body didn't disturb her, she found the pull and twist of his flesh beautiful.

For one, solid moment, his chest seized.

Beautiful.

Something broke inside of him, and he struggled to see into her mind without drawing her attention to it. Did she realize she'd even had this thought? A sudden desperation overcame him to know, but at the same time he was terrified of asking just to hear her deny it, or worse, shoot the idea down completely. As her fingertips neared the center, he felt a lick of emotion overcome him and his vision blurred. Rey gasped and pulled away.

"Are you...crying?" she said stunned. Kylo blinked.

"No," he replied defensively.

"You are," she insisted with a frown.

"I am not! You're insane," he gritted out through clenched teeth, and roughly pulled his shirt down back over his torso. Rey scoffed.

"Aren't you the insane one?" she shot back, rolling onto her heels. Kylo shot her a look as he shuffled back into his tunic.

"Haven't we already had this conversation?" His tone was bitter. He hated this weakness, and to show it in front of her...unacceptable.

Rey remained blissfully silent and watched as he covered himself again. Next came his tabard and, finally, he grabbed at his helmet. Rey turned away. She couldn't watch. She hated that helmet. Kylo paused and gripped it tightly, looking down at it. He ran a thumb along its base as he let her disdain for his familiar guise wash over him. It wasn't as if her opinion on it mattered. Maybe he just enjoyed the negativity. It had been so long since he'd felt the burn of discipline- it was strange, for once, to not be in a constant state of pain. In a strange way...he almost missed it, he thought wildly to himself.

"You're disgusting," she said suddenly, and when Kylo looked up he saw her face twisted in disgust as she looked at him.
"I'm sorry?" he said in confusion.

"You should be," she half shouted. "You enjoy when Snoke tortures you?"

Kylo blinked several times before shaking his head trying to clear his thoughts. "How..." he began, narrowing his eyes, when the realization hit him. "You heard my thoughts?"

"Is that what those were?" she scoffed, still caught up in her bad mood. Kylo's mind race as he leaned closer to her and met her hard gaze.

"You heard my thoughts," he said simply.

"So?" she shot back defiantly.

"Rey..." he said softly, keeping his eyes locked on hers as he put his helmet down beside them. She squeezed her eyes shut and turned away from him. "I told you not to say my name..."

He caught her chin with his hand and turned her head to face him but she kept her eyes closed. It was fine. He could work with that.

"Whatever connects us..." he began, "it's growing stronger."

His voice took on a quiet, reverent tone and Rey could hardly stand it. She squeezed her eyes closed even tighter as a tear slipped past her cheek. She hated feeling his softening emotions towards her, she hated feeling his need for self-inflicted misery like he deserved it, she hated this bond.

"It goes both ways," he said suddenly, his eyes widening as he looked down at her. "And I don't believe it. I don't believe that you hate it. Not really."

Rey's eyes snapped open and the fury that filled them caused Kylo to suck in a stuttering breath as both her look and her feelings poured into him.

"HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I TOLD YOU?" she screamed.

Kylo flinched away, turning his head from her and closing his eyes. She'd asked him several times, he admitted to himself, but it was so hard. Half a lifetime of casual mind reading didn't die quietly. He cinched his brow.

"Then you tell me," he said finally, but her mood was still feral.


"Answer anyway," he insisted, and he looked back at her warily. "I want to hear it in your words."

Rey blinked up at him as her face lost some of its edge. She took a moment to contemplate her feelings, her thoughts.

"This bond is too much," she said finally. "I don't need to feel anyone else's emotions and ideas. Mine are burden enough."

Her eyes narrowed as she focused on him. "Ever since this started I haven't been myself. I've been happy one moment and utterly furious the next. Once, leaving a trading post, I—" she choked up, recalling the time the connection to him sent emotions so overwhelming she thought she would die. She closed her eyes as the moment flooded back to her and when she heard his shallow breaths, she
knew he felt it, too. She opened her eyes and looked up at him heavily. "That was you, wasn't it?"

Kylo knew that moment, the one where he'd finally cracked. He licked absently at the corner of his mouth, unable to look at her, and nodded. Rey lifted up her hands, covered her face, and choked out a sob.

"I don't want this!" she cried from beneath her hands. "I can't rectify the monster I know you to be with this thing that feels too much for his own good. How do either of those things fit together? I don't understand it- I just can't connect the two together, and—"

Sobs overtook her again as Kylo just looked on. He sat there, absorbing her words, determined to feel absolutely nothing even though what she said terrified him. *She doesn't want this. She doesn't want it….is it such a surprise?* He resisted the urge to smile bitterly and suddenly her red-splotched face looked up at him again, beseeching him with her eyes, and instinctually he felt himself pulling away.

"And you tell me nothing," she went on. "No matter how many times I ask, even when," she huffed, running a hand through her disheveled hair. "even when we're about to *die! You say nothing!*

He watched as her face twisted and shifted for several moments before slowly letting her confidence seep back into it. Pressing her lips together, she looked at him. "Well I'm done," she said finally, and jumping to her feet, she began to walk away.

"What are you doing?" he asked, rising to his feet in turn.

"Running," she said matter-of-factly, picking up her pace to put as much distance between them as she could without *actually* running. She was so tired. She didn't have it in her to run anymore…

Panic flashed through him, the familiar adrenaline filling his veins as he spun on his heel and took a few long strides before he reached her and grabbed her, slinging her around to him and holding both of her arms in his grasp pulling her against him.

"Why?" he demanded.

She struggled to pull away from him, straining in his grasp. "Because it's what I do now," she said through gritted teeth.

His mouth twisted as he fought to keep her near him and he shook her as he spoke. "No it isn't. *No it isn't, You fight, Rey!*

Her gaze wandered away from him, her face blank.

"Is this what they're teaching you?" He hissed, shaking her again. He ducked his head, trying to meet her line of sight but she just turned farther away from him. It was infuriating. "Hmm?" he growled. "Are they teaching you to run away, like a coward, instead of standing up to *fight?*

"It's NOT cowardly!" she fired back, turning to face him finally with a scowl. Her teeth were bared. "Sometimes the best thing to do is to retreat," she recited, "run away, until a better and more opportune mome—"

"And when would that be?" he cut her off. "Do you realize, Rey, *why* it is the Resistance never seems to be able to get an edge against the Order? Do you?"

He shook her again, forcing her to look at him and warily she did. "Because they never stand up
and fight, Rey! How long do you think the Order would last, really, if the Resistance truly amassed their forces and launched a genuine offensive?"

Rey looked up at him, scandalized. "What are you saying?"

He grit his teeth. "I'm saying they'd be over, Rey. No, it wouldn't necessarily be fast, and it would be a bloodbath, but the Resistance would win. Snoke's number one fear is that one day the Resistance realizes this and ends them, but they're too stupid, too cowardly to ever see it and this is why they are destined to lose, and why I refuse to let you go down with them! I've refused ever since I laid eyes on you!"

Rey let the information wash over her, trying to match what Kylo told her with what little knowledge she possessed of her chosen allies. Her time with the Resistance had been limited, so she just didn't know. What she did know was that they were careful, always careful. Their numbers were few, it seemed, but the man in front of her, Commander of the First Order, seemed to claim otherwise. Could it really be?

_The Resistance...cowardly? I've never seen it, but it's these same 'cowards' I'm leading him to, and _

She watched as Kylo's eyes grew wide and his breath faltered. His hands slackened around her arms and Rey stared at him dumbfounded as he stepped away from her.

"Is that where we're headed?" he said quietly. "To the Resistance base?"

Rey suddenly felt fear flood through her. Fear and frustration that he not only now knew but that she'd been careless enough to let it slip. Stupid, stupid bond.... She inwardly cursed and tried to collect herself. She couldn't look weak- not in front of him. She balled her hands into fists, pressing her nails into her palms and let the pressure spike through her.

"Yes," she said calmly.

Kylo took another step back, his boots shuffling in the dust, as he nodded a couple times before turning away from her, his eyes in a daze. He hunched his shoulders and Rey could see that his hands covered his face as he stumbled aimlessly.

"So your army..." she began sternly. "If you have some way of calling them, now would be the time."

She grit her teeth. Why was she helping him? Why in the universe's name was she telling him to call his ship trusting that he wouldn't force her to go with him? Kylo was a mess. She knew this now. She also knew that he probably wouldn't make it through any sort of trial without melting down completely, taking half the base with it. No, it would be better, safer, for him to just go back-go back to wherever he came from where they knew how to deal with him.

He had fallen to his knees now, splayed against the cracked ground, and his body hung forward like a limp rag doll. Rey stared at his back warily, resisting the urge to prod at his mind after having yelled at him so thoroughly over it just moments before.

He mumbled something but Rey couldn't hear. "What?" she asked.

"What. Army?" he enunciated harder this time, and Rey frowned.

"So you really did come here alone," she stated. When he didn't reply, she felt her eyes dampen as she looked around aimlessly, desperate to hold herself back. Although it would've been an
unfortunate outcome, the idea that maybe Kylo really did have some reserve force waiting to collect him had buoyed her slightly that maybe, if they really had to, they could just call his ship and they wouldn't have to die out here. As it was, Rey wasn't entirely sure that it was the base she was leading them to, but whatever it was was big and it was the only thing that made sense. Regardless, the backup plan was officially gone and relief at hearing that Kylo had nothing was not something that came to her. She stared at him, willing the tears back, as she licked at her parched lips.

"So if there's no army…" then how are you here? her mind finished for her.

Suddenly, Kylo rose to his feet, twisting towards her but his hair hung low, covering his face like a curtain. He walked up her and she stalwartly kept her ground when he ducked at her feet to scoop up his helmet. Rey held her breath and felt air rush by her as he moved around and past her, walking away. She turned, watching him leave, and she stood there. She was torn between continuing to stand helplessly and just chasing after him when his voice cut through the silence of the planet.

"Let's go," he called roughly. He didn't stop. He kept walking. And as Rey swallowed back the dryness in her throat, she looked about herself and saw that their supplies were still strewn everywhere. She collected them hurriedly, tossing them into the sack and, finally, hefted it over her shoulder. It was extremely heavy, and her steps dug hard into the dirt. She lifted up her head to see him getting farther away but all she could wonder was how he'd been able to carry the damn thing so effortlessly, and for days.

Kylo was strong. This was another thing she knew.

She winced, tugging the strap harder over her shoulder, and forced herself to catch up to him.


Yes, something was off, and as Rey forced herself to ignore the tightening of her muscles as she hefted their only true lifeline, she wondered, warily, if she really wanted to know why.

Chapter End Notes

Guys...I don't have a lot to say this chapter, other thank thank you, thank you, thank you for being so awesome, and thank you to Jinga, Allison, Nareno, Iceybae, Karla, DauntlessSubconscious, All_The_Feels, chai, rachel_greatest, reyvenpi, Nina10, and GotMyInvite for commenting and sharing you guys' thoughts with me because you all know that's my lifeblood and feeds the addiction and tenuous grasp on insanity that fuels this fic. I wish I didn't have such a time-consuming job so that I could just fall into this story like it deserves. It really drives me nuts. So I thank you all, as always, for your patience, and hope you enjoyed this chapter.
Rey hefted their supplies on her back. They'd walked in steady silence for hours, and after days of being on this planet, she could tell what time it was easily. Glancing up at the sky, it was late afternoon. She found herself stealing looks at Kylo's back as they walked. His pace hadn't wavered and she studied him like one would a drawing- arms pushed out from his side, a heavy step that seemed to trample the ground underfoot- and she couldn't help but notice how his fists periodically clenched.

Gripping their supplies, her back was aching but she'd never admit it. Kylo had carried their things for days- she should be able to do it as well. But the silence….she'd gotten used to exchanges, as unusual as they often were. This was getting on her nerves.

She took a few more steps before shuffling to a halt, plunking down the sack with a loud clatter, and staring at his back in front of her. His reaction wasn't there. He just kept walking.

"Hey," she called. "Stop!"

She huffed in frustration as he actively ignored her. "Kylo!"

There was a zing along their connection. That got his attention, she thought, and he spun on his heel to face her.

"Are you tired already?" he called. Rey shook her head.

"No." she said wiping her brow before smearing some of the grease from the paste that had transferred onto her hand onto her trousers. "Hungry. We forgot to eat."

Kylo didn't forget. He was too panicked. Too angry. Adrenaline suppressed the need for food but it was catching up with him. He hated it. His whole body was vibrating and he wasn't sure whether it was from starvation, exhaustion, or anticipation. Probably all three.

He stood there and watched as she defiantly opened up the sack and started taking out their supplies, setting up the stove and pulling out a misshaped rack to set the pan on. Lastly came the rations. Taking a canister of water, she began to prepare.

"Do you want some?" she called, swirling her finger around in the muck.

Kylo watched in silence with a slight cringe, looking about himself like something could actually change around them, before going back to her. He loomed awkwardly for a bit, unsure of what to do, before surrendering himself to sitting down.

As she cooked for a change, normally it was him, she glanced up at him periodically.

"Don't be like that," she said finally.

"Be like what?" came his modulated voice.

"Take that thing off."

"Be angry because you're leading us straight to the enemy?"
"You mean your enemy. They certainly aren't mine."

Kylo scoffed. Grabbing at the release, he slid his helmet off but refused to make eye contact with her.

Finally finished, she pushed half of it onto a plate and handed it over to him, watching as he eyed it with trepidation. She scraped her own half onto another plate. He'd had to eat this slop every meal for days now and it was beginning to be its own kind of torture.

Rey, sensing his thoughts, scooped up a mouthful and smiled a little bitterly at him.

"You know, I had to eat this stuff every single day for years. I was lucky if I could spare more than one meal a day."

Kylo said nothing as he finally shoved some into his own mouth. He couldn't help but wince as he chewed, much to Rey's amusement. She was already half done with hers.

Silence overtook them again.

This time when she packed up, he waited. When they started off, Rey took the lead pointing them where to go. Kylo kept pace with her.

When they'd first found themselves in this situation, after he'd finally gotten his hands on her, he had been elated- the exhilaration kept the heat at bay and the exhaustion from his mind. But now as he watched her walk just a few paces ahead of him, he felt a churning in his gut at the thought of her leading them to the Resistance, even if it was their only option for survival. They would take him. They would take her. Would they take her? She'd spent time with the enemy. In the Order she'd be deemed contaminated and a ripe candidate for reconditioning. Would the Resistance do the same?

Behind his mask he gave a low growl and he saw her head flinch briefly to the side to glance at him before moving back as if she'd heard nothing at all. His eyes bored into the back of her head.

Recondition her for being with me… he inwardly churned, and a slow rage started to burn in him. They wouldn't have the gall.

Grinding his teeth, he imagined them keeping her locked up somewhere, maybe even strapping her down, until she was as terrified of him as she had been before and it made him sick with impotent fury that he could do nothing about it- he had no weapon, no one to command. He clenched his fists before reaching out to grab her arm and sling her around to face him.

Rey gasped and looked at him in very angry annoyance.

"KYL—"

"What will they do to you?" he gritted out.

"Excuse me?"

"When we get there. Will they recondition you?"

Rey huffed, grabbing at the shoulder strap of their supplies to keep it in place. "Will they what?"

"When we get there," he enunciated almost mockingly, "will they punish you for being out here with me?"
Rey's face twisted in disgust as his hand dropped from her arm. "Why would they do that? It's not like I had a choice being out here with you, now did I?"

Kylo blinked back behind his guise and straightened up.

"Besides, I've never heard of 'reconditioning' or whatever you said," she continued, hefting the canvas sack. "The Resistance isn't like that."

She looked up at him with a frown but somehow could tell, despite being unable to see his face, that he wasn't convinced.

"They wouldn't do something like that," she insisted, and silence crept back between them as they stared at each other.

"Are you sure?"

"YES," she half yelled.

Taking in a couple slow breaths, Kylo looked down at the very angry woman glaring up at him, clenched his fists again, and continued walking. He heard her shuffling steps behind him as she worked to catch up.

"And why do you care?" she asked, craning in front of him, getting in the way, as they kept moving. "Shouldn't you be more worried about yourself when we get there?"

Rey could hear him sharply take in a distorted breath and felt a weird spike of nonchalance pass from him. Rey scoffed, taking it as an answer.

"Don't tell me you don't care," she challenged.

"Now who's reading minds?" Kylo quipped.

Rey frowned, her pace slowing some before she recovered.

"Kylo," she said, going to grab his arm but only catching fabric in her grasp. It was enough as she pulled him, yanking him to a halt.

Reluctantly, he turned to face her. She scowled up at him and knew he was looking at her. Her fingers clenched tighter at his sleeve.

"I don't believe you're going to walk in there accepting a death sentence," she stated.

Kylo sighed. "And why is that?"

Rey blinked as she tried to think up a reason, but when her mind drew blank, she found her hand slipping from his arm. The truth was she didn't know him well enough, or hardly at all, to answer that question. What she did know was that somehow, she felt, there were similarities between them. She wasn't sure how because there were certainly plenty of differences. He had a family. She didn't. He'd never truly starved in his life. She was always on the brink of starvation. He wanted for nothing, and she wanted for everything.

She heard him suck in a breath like he was about to speak, but he didn't. She looked up at him.

"Because somehow you've survived this far, for whatever it's worth. You've maimed and you've...you've killed to do it," she said with a wince of her brow, "and it would be a waste to just throw it all away for suicide."
Kylo could feel it again—those underlying currents to her thoughts that he knew she was only half aware of. The ones he knew she would squash if she could sense them. Knew she would squash them because it was what he would do. Greedily, he let them flow into him.

"Oh Rey…" the mechanized voice gasped as he stepped closer. "Are you concerned for me?"

Rey felt a pang of something, something distracting she couldn't quite put her finger on, before realizing he was looming over her and she automatically frowned up at him.

"Wanting to understand a motivation isn't concern," she declared, recovering. She could almost hear him smiling.

"And you want that badly to know my motivations? You ask me so often about them."

Her frown deepened into scowl.

"In fact you've been begging me, if I recall…" he almost purred.

Slowly, he raised a hand to her cheek but she swatted it away.

"It's not like that," she growled.

Almost instantly, he threw his shoulders back and Rey blinked in surprise at the sudden transformation.

"Then can we save this conversation for later?" he asked. He looked down at her waiting for a reply, and after several seconds of silence and her sour expression, he turned on his heel and went back to walking.

Rey pressed her lips together in annoyance and felt herself overcome with the overwhelming urge to slam her foot down into the dirt. So she did.

"And when would that be?" she called after him bitterly, a cloud of dust kicking up to billow around her knees. "When I'm safely tucked in your arms tonight?" she baited him sarcastically.

Despite gaining in distance from her, she heard a sudden burst of mechanized laughter as he looked over his shoulder in her direction. "If you prefer!"

Rey's eyes grew wide. Her grip on the strap of the sack became iron as she let out a sudden scream of frustration and stomped her foot again causing the dust cloud to rise higher. Fuming after him, wishing she had lasers in her eyes to shoot through his stupid helmet, part of her wondered when she had become so physically angry. She'd always been in control of her anger, but there was something about this man that made her want to destroy entire consoles. Off in the distance, she swore she heard him laughing again, and with no other reasonable options left, bared her teeth and chased after him.

—

Rey had been calm for a few hours by the time the darkness fell and they had to set up camp. Her face was the picture of peace as she stirred their rations, and Kylo sat across from her, his mask somewhere else, gazing intently into the fire. He looked lost to it.

As she cooked the strange meat, she snatched glances at his face in the firelight and found herself looking more often than she intended to. She couldn't help it. With the light hitting him just the right way, she could see Han there. She could see Leia. Elements of others, too, she supposed. He
was so young.

He was so young. And yet she couldn't fathom how many people he had probably killed. How many he had made to suffer and probably beg for death. Even living in Jakku, when she'd had to kill, she tried to be as swift as possible about it. There was one time, though, when the death had been messy, had taken a long time, and the blood and internal tissue had gotten into everything, and she tried but she just couldn't find the being's heart as he'd screamed out at her to just kill him. She'd had nightmares for months. Sighing at the memory, she shook it out of her head, and when she looked up, she found him staring at her. She paused, mid stir, but he said nothing.

"What is it?" she finally asked, breaking eye contact casually to resume her stirring.

"You told me not to read your thoughts anymore," he said languidly, tightening his arms around his knees.

"And is that what you were doing?" she said, scraping half the pan onto a plate. He didn't reply. As she handed him his share, she quirked a brow at him and he lightly pursed his lips.

"It's hard not to when you're projecting," he replied quietly.

"I wasn't projecting," she countered, just as quietly.

"You were," he countered back, even more quietly.

Rey raised her brows as she pushed the remainder of the rations onto her own plate and cleared her throat before taking her first mouthful.

No natural sounds came from the planet around them, with only the hiss of the chemical fire and the sound of chewing filling up teasing away at the silence.

Rey scraped the last of the sauce up. "How do you recommend not projecting then?" she asked, stealing a quick glance at him before looking back down to lick her plate.

Kylo carefully maneuvered the last of his food onto his utensil and held it in front of him. "You're asking me?" he said incredulously, before taking his last bite.

Rey stood up and walked over to him, holding out her plate. He looked up at her and gingerly accepted the unnervingly clean dish. Grabbing a water canister and a strip of canvas, he washed up.

"I guess that's what I'm doing," she said finally. Unseen, Kylo's lip quirked.

"The first thing you need to do," he began, careful not to spill any water unnecessarily onto the ground, "is to not be so explicit about thoughts you don't want to share. You were basically narrating your encounter with that Draethos."

He braced himself for some rebuke but when none came, he found himself turning to look at her. Instead participating in their usual snarking, she sat in front of the dwindling fire, looking down at her hands. He only watched her for a moment before turning back to his task.

"Less defined thoughts," he emphasized, scrubbing at a plate. "Skirt the memory, don't go into it completely. Then people around you...well, people who can hear...won't have to know how you ended up making a mess of an enemy."

Putting the dishes away, he found himself amused suddenly at the image of a younger Rey, frantic, stabbing wildly, for a way to finally end the life of a deadly attacker who had long outlived his
threat. Everyone had those moments, he recalled. The one thing that wouldn't die. It was almost like a rite of passage.

Turning back to the fire, he found her sitting there as before, caught up in her hands, palms up, laying limply in her lap. Her eyes seemed a million lightyears away.

"Hey," he said, nudging her with his knee as he passed.

Rey sucked in a breath and looked around herself. "Sorry, I…missed what you said."

Kylo forced his hands to continue grabbing for the sack as his brain tripped over the fact that she just apologized to him. He pulled it up, carrying it with him.

"I could tell," he replied evenly.

He laid it out and sank back to the ground, testing it as a sort of pillow before making a pained face and pushing it away, thumping back down to the overly flat surface of the planet with a sigh.

The flame sputtered out, and as his eyes worked to adjust to the starlight, he felt a soft brush against his side that almost made him jump before he heard the familiar light breath that came with it. In the dark, with their eyes still unfocused, he knew she couldn't see him smile, couldn't see his chest rise and fall with deep breaths as he leaned over to help pull her more comfortably next to him. Used to the routine, she complied readily and he huffed as the brush of her hair touched the underside of his chin.

She was warm in the cold of the wastes when it hit him that their nights were numbered. He wondered, suddenly, if she knew how far they were from the base. He wondered if he even wanted to know and if just letting it be a surprise wouldn't be better. He felt her sigh and squirm against him as she blew warm air onto her hands.

"Tomorrow," she said between huffs.

"What?"

"I think it's tomorrow."

Rey tucked in close but she felt him go still. She didn't care. She'd lost count of the nights at this point, but one thing she knew for certain was that it was definitely getting colder. She heard a low growl rumble in Kylo's chest as she saw a flutter of fabric and something light but familiar drape over them.

"Is this…?" she began, trying to finger the makeshift blanket.

"Yes," he grunted.

"But Kylo, this is full of—"

"No. I washed it."

Rey was tempted to sit up and look at him squarely but didn't want to disturb the potential cocoon of warmth that could form under cover.

"You wasted water to wash the blood off this thing?" she asked incredulously.

"What does it matter?" he replied coldly. "We'll get there tomorrow."
Rey's mouth promptly clicked shut. She couldn't argue with that. If it wasn't within a day, it was definitely within two, and they had just enough supplies for that. It was lucky that they were provisioned for long enough, since Kylo insisted on always cleaning what they ate with.

She tried to relax.

"You read my thoughts again," he said suddenly.

"Did I?"

Shifting up, she could see him looking down at her, his eyes somewhat shining in the exoplanet light.

"Should I yell at you for it?" he asked casually.

Rey's brow twitched and she bit the corner of her lip. "It was an accident."

Kylo started to roll away from her, suppressing a grin. "Ahh, I see…" he said, his voice tinged with usually playful sarcasm.

As her source of warmth moved away from her, she found herself reflexively grabbing his tunic with both hands to pull him back with a jerk. Kylo gaped down at her.

"It's cold!" she grumbled as an excuse. "and you're disturbing the cocoon!" she scolded, trying to fluff the cover back again to what it was.

Kylo stared at her as she poked and prodded his cowl into more of a tent and a cold apprehension dripped into his chest.

_The last night…_ he found himself echoing again and again. _The last night for this stupid survival game. The last night before…_

He couldn't finish the thought. He refused to. It left his chest feeling tight over an entire slew of things he didn't want to confront. Still watching her prod the material, he pushed her hand away, jerked the cover up over them, and wrapped an arm around her, crushing her against him.

"K…Kylo," her voice came muffled. He didn't hear her.

_The last night…_

"Kylo!" she yelled, and pinched him in the chest.

"OW!" he yelped, and when his grip loosened, she pushed back, gasping.

"What's gotten into you?" she demanded, "I could hardly breathe!"

The nighttime lights filtered through the fabric, leaving little pin pricks of light all against her skin and his. He looked at her, mouth slightly agape.

"It's nothing."

Rey looked up at him incredulously, desperate to call him a liar but refraining. She knew better at this point, and she was too tired to argue. Instead she felt for that piece of twine that connected them- only it wasn't twine now, a bit more like rope, and when she tugged at it, she felt a sliver of his emotions trickle down to her. She swallowed a gasp. He was always too much, too many things, as she tried to pick apart the heady mix of paranoia, trepidation, bitterness, fatalism, and
even loss that hit her.

Loss.

Oh.

So many things about him confused her, befuddled her to no end. Like how he could come here with no backup plan, or crash his ship onto hers, or chase her through the galaxy to begin with when she was nobody at all. But out of everything, loss…it was something she was intimately familiar with. Even if she didn't entirely understand how he could apply that feeling to their impending rescue from this wasteland.

Fingering lightly at his tunic, her brow furrowed. "It's cold," she said finally, and raising up her hand, she slowly, carefully, wound it around him. He was so large compared to her. It was like holding on to a tree. She felt him stiffen at her touch and the rope connecting them slacken as he closed off from her completely, but she didn't budge. She wasn't kidding, really, about the temperature.

Kylo's breath froze as her arm willingly clung to him. Willingly held onto him. He didn't know what to do about it. It was cold, and it had been cold, but she'd never done anything like this before. Unable to resist, he touched slightly at the edge of her mind and a strange sensation twisted at him.

"You don't need to pity me," he grunted, but still her grip persisted.

"Being cold has nothing to do with pity," she replied, and he could hear sleep starting to creep into her voice.

"Nothing to do with the fact that you're clinging to a dead man?"

He felt her still, and her hand suddenly ball the fabric at his back. Yes, that struck a nerve.

"I didn't know you were dead," she replied finally.

Ohh, but I've been dead for years...

He sighed. He didn't have it in him to argue either. Letting his eyes fall closed, he gritted his teeth, slung his arm around her, tucked her, where she belonged, beneath his chin, and aggressively willed himself to sleep.

—

Disentangling themselves from each other at first light, Rey yawned and felt the distinct ghost of something on her cheek. She pushed it out of her mind as breakfast called and soon they were back on their feet. He made a point of solemnly draping his cowl over her head against the sun before they began traveling again, and they took up their direction in silence.

Within a few hours, Rey hardly noticed when something large loomed on the horizon, and it took Kylo's hand on her arm to draw her attention to it. She gasped when it caught her eye, and when she looked at his masked face, he didn't look back. He just stared ahead. Releasing her arm, she tried to press against his mind but felt it utterly closed off as he took one step, and then another. He led the way.

—
"Take the mask off. They'll be scared of it," she half whispered unnecessarily once they reached within running distance of the structure. Rey had prodded carefully with the Force and she was certain- it was definitely the Resistance. Kylo growled.

"You know, I think I'd rather die out in the wastes than go there."

"Now you don't want to go? I'm trying to help you," she insisted, and as the hiss of his helmet freed his head, his eyes sparked as he held her gaze.

"Why would you do that? You know they're going to kill me right? Chain me up and kill me?"

He fumed, and Rey could feel the tension building in him ever since they started getting closer. She should have expected this. Vacillating between meeting his fate and running away, he made to turn back, lose himself again in the wastes, when he clenched his fists and dashed his helmet into the dirt. He slammed his foot furiously into the parched ground and screamed. The silence of the planet shattered with it, and his whole body shook.

Rey stood by, unmoved as she watched. Part of her wondered when she had stopped fearing his outbursts. Maybe it was just exhaustion. As she felt along the edge of his mind, she sensed his frustration and sighed, looking on as he fell down to his knees and picked up his helmet and began to rub the dirt off of it like a child who hadn't meant to hurt his favorite toy.

"Come on…" she gently said, and as she turned her head to look in the direction of the base, she squinted and swore she saw movement far off in the distance.

"Why? Why should I listen to you?" he mumbled, half-heartedly buffing the helmet's crown with his sleeve, and Rey arched a brow. This was petulant.

"Because where else have you got to go?"

Kylo's shoulders hunched. He gripped his helmet between his hands and Rey's gaze grew wary. Looking up at the still burning sky, the light pierced her eyes, the sudden contraction of her pupils causing pain that made her close them as she lowered her head and pulled Kylo's cowl close. No, the heat of this planet was nothing like Jakku. It was terrible. The lack of any life whatsoever proved it. When the epiphany came to her, it was very, very bitter.

"If our situation was reversed," she began quietly, "if it was your fleet up there waiting to take us….I'd've gone with you," she admitted. "if only to get off this terrible, stars-forsaken planet." She gave a small wry smile before she could no longer choke back the emotions that welled up suddenly at the prospect of all this being over soon- at no longer having to sleep on the ground, eating rations. "I'd've gone," she said again. Having his arms around you, her mind helpfully continued and she openly scoffed as she turned away, pushing the thought out of her head as the instinct to conserve water took over.

Maybe it was a ridiculous admission to have made, but she hated this planet. She hated it so much. As she glanced at the swell of the base on the horizon, she felt more than heard him give a low laugh. She turned back, narrowing her eyes at him, and he looked towards her with a slight, almost wistful, smile on his face. His expression frightened something in her.

"I should have done it then," he said almost dreamily.

"Done what?"

She was cautious as his expression turned harsh and he swallowed hard, thumping his just tended-
to helmet back in the dirt. "Stuck with the order," he answered, "and done things the…what is it? 'Old Fashioned Way'?" and he laughed, a strange, desperate, borderline maniacal thing. Rey reared back, a small flicker of betrayal flitting through her before being stomped out again. He was her enemy. Wasn't this to be expected? She looked down at him coldly.

"Why didn't you?"

When he looked back up at her again, his eyes were so full of emotion that her mind snagged trying to process it and he rose to his feet. He lazily stepped towards her to stand close- much too close. Rey felt a strange static against her skin at his proximity, and she could feel his gaze on her.

"I couldn't wait," he said in a low voice.

Rey tilted her head up and Kylo's arm twitched absently as he stared intently down at her. Giving in to the urge, he raised his hand, and with the crook of his finger, brushed it gently along her jaw.

"You tormented me," he struggled to say evenly, "and then Snoke tried to take yo- take my thoughts of you away," he quickly corrected with a small press of his lips, "from me."

His eyes followed his hand as he raised his bent finger to trail along her cheek and he swallowed hard. "When I realized what he was doing, it was too much. I couldn't allow it." Kylo clenched his jaw as his eyes grew harder. "So I left."

"You left," she echoed with a touch of incredulity.

"To find you."

His eyes grew wide, almost wild, as he watched her, and saw as tears of frustration, maybe even damnable pity, filled her eyes when she glanced sidelong at him with a tilt of her head. His finger lingered against her skin. A million questions came to her, most of them starting with 'why', and when she tried to untangle it all to find one to ask first, she felt a mental shove along their bond interrupting her.

"Let them kill me," he said suddenly, and her face morphed into shock.

"The Order already has a bounty on my head. I…didn't exactly leave quietly," he admitted with a small smile, and ran his knuckles more confidently against her lower cheek.

"At least the Resistance will attempt some mock form of justice and then bestow a swift death. It's more than I deserve, and better than I'd get going back to the Order," he rationalized with a slight shrug.

His nonchalance, again, bit at her. "But you could get away, couldn't you?"

She didn't understand. She didn't understand why she was suggesting anything to him and why he especially wasn't thinking of it himself. She didn't understand why he was so intent on dying. Glancing at his waist, she motioned towards his lightsaber.

"Oh, this?" he said casually. Unclipping it, he hefted it up. Seeing Kylo with a weapon in his hand caused Rey's chest to inadvertently seize, but he did nothing but hold it between them. She saw in her mind suddenly the same exact picture of Kylo and Han on the bridge and she bit the inside of her cheek. Kylo looked up at her from his weapon.

"Do you see this cut here?" he says, careful to lightly run his finger along the sharp, severed edge.
"That's you," he whispered. "You did that." Looking at her, he gasped as his touch came away too heavy and a small, thin cut sliced into his flesh. He pulled his hand away with a frown and a small pearl of blood welled up on the pad of his finger. They both found themselves watching it when, with a flicker of his brow, Kylo brought it to his mouth and gently sucked at the wound. He glanced at her, finding it difficult to maintain long-term eye contact, before pulling his hand away.

"It's useless. I can no longer use it." he said finally.

"It's broken?" she asked, raising a hand to hover over the device, almost thinking about touching it.

Slowly, he nodded.

Rey sighed and pulled her hand away. Flashes of the beginning of all this, of how afraid she'd been of engaging him again in combat, and how it had acted as incentive to get them both through this ordeal, swirled with irritation inside her. She was annoyed at how well she had been played and she could feel the corner of his lips rise and when she looked up she saw his bittersweet amusement at her realization, and her annoyance promptly increased.

"So there is no grand escape plan," he said, clipping the broken thing back to his hip. "I could… probably use the force to try and push my way out, but that only goes so far against so many people." His lip quirked into a smirk and almost into something resembling an actual smile.

She wanted to be annoyed with him, annoyed at the tricks and his defeatism, but when she grit her teeth and looked up, that smile….she knew he'd been smiling more. She had noticed. Why? And why is he smiling at her?

The worst part was that his small smile wasn't all that unpleasant, and she felt that same strange feeling spreading through her as she tried her damnedest to be angry with him. His smile shouldn't do anything to her.

His eyes wandered over her face, and she let him. They just stood there in the wastes.

"We're not far," he said, breaking the silence.

Rey blinked up at him. "No."

His face took on a serious expression, and as he took one more step closer Rey felt a weird jolt of something pass through her before he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. She stood there, her mind working to try and find a reason to fight back, to not allow this sort of thing despite how many nights was it now? She decided, as his hand gripped at her lower back, that maybe it was a bit like granting the dead one of their last wishes, since he was so intent on that, although why this would be one of them for him she had no idea. His hand shifted to snake around her small waist, cradling her, and she felt herself being molded into him. He rested his cheek against the top of her head, where she fit under his chin so perfectly, he mused, and he closed his eyes. He clung to the moment, and she contemplated how she never let him so close before outside of the nights they spent huddled for warmth. Never.

"When I first saw you in the distance ahead of me," he whispered, "standing amongst the wreckage…"

She listened.

"…I knew I would never let you out of my sight again."

He sighed, pushing his face against her hair.

"…Although this is doomed to be yet another lie, at least I know I'll die near you."
Rey found herself raising her hand to grip the fabric of his tunic and her mind was spinning. This was ridiculous, but the forlorn feeling, coupled with his morbid monologue, both saddened and disturbed her.

"That's better than the alternative," he continued with a slight chuckle.

"Why?" she gasped against him, gripping tighter.

"I don't know…" he said quietly, and he held her close. "Maybe…." he fell into thought, narrowing his eyes. "Maybe it's the bond."

And just like that, he released her. He took in a deep, shaky breath as her eyes stared at nothing under her stricken brow. He looked down at her quietly, brushing a hand one last time against her cheek, and then turned, took up the sack she dropped, wretched it open, and tossed in his helmet. Slinging it over his shoulder, he peered off into the distance at the base.

"Shall we go?" he asked without looking back at her, and he started to slowly walk.

Rey turned, finally, and her expression was torn. They had nowhere else to go anyway, she reasoned. It had become the mantra. Nowhere else to go. Nowhere else.

Taking one step, and then another, she began to follow, keeping a few paces behind.

He never looked behind at her as they got closer, and all she could do was keep glancing at his back. That's when she found herself memorizing the way he walked, the way the muscles in his back moved, the angle of his arms…was she really looking at a dead man? He deserves to be dead. He deserves to be dead. It tore her mind to pieces.

When the base was just a short jog ahead of them, Kylo stopped and held out a cautious hand, forcing Rey to stop as well.

"They have their weapons trained on us," he hissed.

Rey nodded. Looking at his set features staring angrily in the direction of his enemy, she rested her hand on his arm before stepping in front of him. Looking at the base, only at the base, maybe, she contemplated, it would be the last time she'd ever look at him. Maybe they were both about to die.

"Identify yourselves!" a voice over an intercom yelled, breaking the overbearing silence.

Clenching her fist, she replied. "I'm Rey!"

Rey tried to think of some other way to call herself and realized bitterly, suddenly, that she had no last name, no other distinguishing trait by which to identify herself, and it burned her. Somewhere in the back of her mind she could feel Kylo looking at her, and a strange sort of comfort curled through her mind.

"Rey of Jakku!" she called again, "General Organa is expecting me!"

Somehow she felt Kylo flinch without seeing him, and felt again as he just as quickly composed himself, if a bit more tense than before.

The intercom didn't reply and they could see the base start to scramble. After a moment-

"Approach but keep your hands clear!" the voice ordered, and they did so, keeping their hands held a bit out to the side, palms wide, as they approached the base.
As they got closer, they sew the trenches and the slight mound of the underground structure. It looked like the whole base had turned out to meet them as an impressive line of people, and their guns, were pointed their way. But it was definitely Resistance, and as they got closer, one of the people in the line began to move frantically, lowering their weapon, and started running towards them. It was Poe.

"REY!" he shouted, and as she caught sight of him, she nearly cried.

He caught her up in an enormous hug, slinging her around in the air as they laughed, and Rey felt a lightness trickle back into her that she hadn't felt in weeks.

"Rey! We thought…" he swallowed down his tears as he set her back onto the ground. "We detected a crash on our far outer perimeter," he said as she beamed at him, "but when we got there, there was nothing- just a burnt out— Who's that?"

Slowly, Kylo caught up with them. Covered in black, he stood out, and Poe, snapping back into soldier mode, moved around Rey with a light squeeze of her arm and her smiling face faltered. Following after him, she gently grabbed Poe's arm as her eyes flickered to her companion for the past several days.

Kylo looked at him with an expression of stone. He could feel Rey's happiness at seeing this man, ah, yes, the pilot, and his own feelings at seeing her happy face, seeing her touch this man. Seeing him look at her like that threatened to ignite something terrible in him, but he contained it down to a glare. She's rubbed off on me, he half thought forlornly. It was the only thing left he was capable of with no weapon. As the pilot neared, Kylo watched as he took him in. His face was unfamiliar to this man, but his clothes….

Poe held up his gun as recognition flashed across his face.

"Cuff 'im!" he ordered, motioning with his weapon. Kylo sighed and watched as Rey's grip tightened on the pilot's arm. He watched her as she said nothing. Not like there's anything she could say to change this… he thought bitterly. As they shoved him around, he tried to give her a small smile but failed as he was grabbed roughly by the arms, their supplies wretched from his shoulder, and his hands pulled behind him as a thick pair of cuffs were snapped around his wrists.

Poe snarled as he ambled up to him, his face set and grim. "I thought I recognized a TIE fighter in the wreckage. Admiral class, am I right?"

Kylo lazily looked up at him from the hair framing his face and said nothing. Poe gave an empty smirk and Kylo looked away. As the pilot hovered and his shackles were tugged and tested, his eyes flickered to Rey and Rey stared back, her face distraught. Satisfied that he was secured, Poe backed away, willing himself to be calm after coming face to face with the creature who tortured him, and put a comforting hand on Rey's arm.

"Come on," he whispered quietly to her, but when he tried to move them, Rey wouldn't budge.

With a frown, he looked down at her and found himself puzzled suddenly by her surprising cleanliness. Hadn't she been stranded out there for days? Something black around her shoulders contrasted sharply with her dusty gray garb, something he didn't remember, and he watched as she seemed to finger it absently. She didn't look at him, she looked straight past him, and when he turned to follow her line of sight, he saw Kylo Ren staring back at them, staring at Rey. As they began to push him forward he watched as the monster craned his neck to keep his gaze squarely on her and he recoiled. Poe looked from Kylo to Rey, and back again. He didn't get it. He saw the wreckage- never in his life had he seen two ships fused like that before. Hadn't he undoubtedly
been responsible for that carnage? Responsible for clearly stranding them? The least of the things Kylo Ren would now get to finally answer for.

His eyes narrowed warily at the thought. "Come on," he said again, taking her elbow. "It's over now…"

Her face steeled as she looked on, and for all the fear she felt irrationally tugging at her mind, a heady irony couldn't help but seep into her. *Suddenly the predator has become the prey*, she thought idly.

Even as they dragged him, his feet tripping some over the cracks in the ground as they fumbled to negotiate his tall frame, she couldn't seem to tear her eyes away. A deep stairway, cut sharply into the ground, opened up before him, and as they led him down, his eyes reached for hers before his face finally disappeared from view. It was done.

Time seemed to still, and slowly, with a gentle push, she was led away.

Chapter End Notes

"Shining in the moonlight, your name I hummed was swept up in the wind and vanished

Smiling at dawn I keep singing that song you taught me
Counted the tears returning to the starry sky
Over and over that night was just repeating
Ahh, deeply, deeply even now…
Yes…I lo- "
[Gackt, "Hoshi no Suna"/"Stardust"]

This chapter was misery. I'm still not satisfied with it. I have never agonized over a chapter so much in my life, and it's the longest one yet. HEARTFELT THANKS to Chai, GotMyInvite, Jinga, Karla, Allison, Raxephan, rachel_greatest, midnightplanets, ivylovesnarry, RensGirl, Huy, Nina10, Sarena, g_girl143, iceybae, Plato, and PoorQueequeq (your comments tipped this story past 300!! Bless you). Hopefully upon this entrance to the base, the lingering questions about whether or not we'll see the rest of the characters have been answered, haha. Thanks so much to all of you for your reviews and for reading- last chapter was somehow the most popular yet and I'm humbled and teary-eyed and hope this new chapter isn't too much of a jumble of things and is just as enjoyable. See you all next chapter. :)}
Chapter Summary

I will make you suffer with these characters, dammit!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rey was in a daze. So many familiar, and also unfamiliar, faces swam around her, some embracing her, others giving her respectful pats on the shoulder, squeezes on the arm…but nothing compared to the thunderbolt of seeing Finn again.

The instant his bright, cheerful face swam into view, she was in tears. Even having been on Luke's planet it had been months since she'd seen him. Much like Poe, he grabbed her up, swinging her in his arms- something she decided she rather liked- and held her face between his hands.

"Oh Rey, we looked everywhere for you! But when we saw the wreckage…” He looked down and away from her, biting back the emotions of that day, when Rey placed her hand comfortingly on top of his.

"It's alright,” she said as encouragingly as she could. She tried to suppress the tinge of sadness she heard creep into her voice. "I'm here!” and when she laughed, the tears welled up again and they both cried, pressing their foreheads together as Poe, her escort to the General, looked on, arms folded, with a pleased look on his face.

After promising, repeatedly, to see each other again later, Poe guided her down through the corridors and deeper into the base where she was greeted with more cheers and friendly gestures. When they finally reached the General's quarters, Poe buzzed the comm.

Looking over at her with a knowing smile, he leaned into the speaker. "Rey here to see the General,” he said with a wink. Rey grinned.

As Poe negotiated with the person on the other end, Rey looked about herself at the smooth-hewn rock that made of the subsurface of the wasteland planet. Ever economical, the Resistance never bothered with covering the natural beauty of wherever they managed to call home, and Rey ran her fingers against the multi-layered strata of rock. The colors shone in various shades of tan, a few layers were even red. Geology was so much simpler to think about than—

With a buzz, the door slid open and Rey looked instantly at Poe who held his arms invitingly forward for her to go ahead of him. Stepping a ways into the room, the area was sparse with a few chairs and a desk when the pilot came up behind her.

"It'll be just a few minutes. Seems the General's out of the office at the moment, but she'll be back soon."

"Oh," Rey said blandly. She didn't want to think about where Leia Organa could be…

Taking her elbow, Poe helpfully guided Rey to a nearby chair. When Rey stared off into the distance saying nothing, Poe gave her a small smile and slipped away.
To endure the humiliation of being clapped in irons and dragged around by these spiritually deficient drones, Kylo inwardly began to shut himself down.

*If they're going to kill me, I don't really want to be around for that anyway...*

He could still feel Rey's presence, it was floating, wafting above him now, clearly somewhere on some upper level, and judging by the comparatively dark rock around them, he was very far down.

His guard consisted of a man at each arm, three at his back, and four at his front. It was an impressive escort for the Resistance, he decided, and felt slightly less insulted- but not by much.

They met very few people on their journey down the narrow passageways of the base. The few they did run into promptly took one look at the group, one look at him, and walked the other direction and down some other corridor.

The sector they brought him to caught him by surprise. Unlike the rest of the natural surface of the base, the prison looked like it had been pulled off a starship and awkwardly shoved into the ground. Rock turned to steel and high-tech flashes, and as his cell door slid open, he was tossed in, shackles and all. Then, the door locked shut. It possessed his only window to the outside world- a tiny 5x5in square of undoubtedly shatter-proof glass.

As he looked about himself, he sighed. He stood there in his dusty blacks, saturated with days of sweat and grime, and even blood, and he grit his teeth. Finally, after reaching something resembling civilization, a part of him couldn't believe he'd have to continue to exist in filthy clothes. Looking behind him he spotted a narrow cot against the wall with thin sheets and a single blanket. As he glanced back down at his shackled hands, he sighed, slumped to the ground with a sprawl of long legs, and leaned his back against his sub-par bed.

*Be grateful*, a voice in the back of his mind told him, *If this were the Order, you'd get nothing.* Kylo scrunched his face and swatted his cuffed hands at the thought.

It was then that presence, that unmistakeable presence, hit him so hard it almost physically hurt. *Skywalker...* he mused. *.....Mother.*

He imagined he could almost hear her footsteps as she came closer and his hands clenched into fists. He knew Rey had mentioned his mother being here, but he didn't want to believe it. Even with her overwhelming Force signature hitting him over the head he still didn't want to believe it. He didn't want to deal with her right now. Ideally he didn't want to deal with her ever.

As the lock on his door disengaged, he closed his eyes and tried to reach for Rey.

"What should I call you?" an older, tired, but still unmistakeable voice said. Kylo's eyes flashed open, his reverie broken.

Slowly he looked up at her from his mussed and matted hair. She looked shockingly ancient to him now- not the stern but sweet-faced woman who had sort of raised him. He fought to control his reaction but his eyes widened despite himself. She smirked, her steady gaze never leaving his face. He said nothing.

"Well, whatever you call yourself now....." she sighed. Finally breaking eye contact, she looked up at the ceiling and he could feel the tumult within her, the conflict, and he didn't understand. Shouldn't it be easy? It was so obvious what to do with him.
"Whatever you call yourself," she repeated again, leveling her gaze back at him, "you know what's coming next."

Ahh, there it was. With a slight roll of his lip, he quietly scoffed and tilted his head back down to look at his hands.

Leia stood there in her standard issue shirt and roomy trousers and looked down at this man before her, dressed head to toe in form-fitting black. And he was a man now. Although his hair covered most of his face from view, he was taller- something she didn't think possible- than the last time she saw him. When she felt for his presence in the Force, however, despite now standing right next to her own flesh and blood, she still felt that same familiar wall that screamed 'I'm alive. Go away.'

Silently, she bit her lip. "Well do you have anything to say?"

Kylo stilled and Leia could feel the anticipation building in her. That question was dangerous- he had a million things he should be saying, things he shouldn't even have to be saying, and so many other terrible things he could say instead. Raising his head, his hair parted around his face and he stared at her with a cold, blank expression. Leia's heart seized.

"Rey," his low voice croaked out. Leia's eyes nearly bugged out of her head. All the anticipation fell away from her.

"Excuse me?" She could feel that old edge creeping back into her voice with him sitting before her now. She realized suddenly she'd seen this posture before, so many times. *Sulking.*

"Absolutely not," she said with finality, and she felt a sting of anger flare out from him, unable to be clamped down.

He expected to be denied, he wasn't stupid, but Kylo's eyes flashed at her tone. She has the audacity to still act like she's my mother, he inwardly fumed, and clenching his fists again, he looked away.

"That girl," Leia said, pressing her lips together, "has nothing more to do with you."

She watched as he folded back into himself and looked away. They existed there in silence- her staring at him in a tumult and him doing everything he could to simply not feel anything. When she realized he wasn't going to speak further, she forced herself to shift back to business.

"You will be left here for the time being," she began, her voice clipped and practiced. "In the morning, if you've no infractions, you'll be allowed five minutes in the refresher and provided clean garments. At noon you'll be taken to your preliminary hearing and we'll go from there."

There was a knock on the cell door and Leia turned her head in surprise. Kylo tensed, and as the door slid slightly open he felt like fire had been injected into his veins.

"General," came Poe's voice. "She's waiting for you upstairs."

Kylo sneered and pulled back one of his legs, tucking it underneath him. "Who?" he insisted through gritted teeth. "Who is here to see you?"

His eyes caught Poe's when Poe partially came into view and the pilot scowled at him. Kylo could taste blood.

*He touched her. He had the nerve to hug her. He's still with her. She's waiting for the old woman up above!*
His eyes snapped to the steel-reinforced ceiling above him and the strain in his face was palpable as he tried to reach out to her.

*Rey*... but he was shut down almost absently by her.

Locking his eyes onto Poe, he felt absolutely feral. "I want to see her *now,*" he growled. "What have you done with her?"

Poe looked on at the display with an odd mix of confusion and alarm. Leia was at a loss for words, utterly caught up in the horror of her son's twisted expression and the overwhelming darkness that seemed to ooze out of him suddenly when she felt Poe stealthily wrap his hand around her arm and slowly guide her out of the room.

"What are you doing, *pilot*?" he spat loudly, rocking up to his knees. "She's not done here, don't you *dare* think you can lay a hand on her!"

Kylo rose to his feet, sucking in loud breaths as he stared at the woman who gave birth to him being pulled away from him. He saw Poe's arm shift and the door began to close.

"No, I think I'm done here," Leia said quietly, and she watched in shock as he stomped towards them, the door locking into place just in time.

Just as he had Rey, Poe took the General gently by the elbow and started to guide her away. Muffled screaming poured into the corridor, along with the sound of impacting metal, and he felt her flinch at every blow even as they got farther away.

Leia's mind was racing. She was overwhelmed, but even so, part of her was still determined.

"Whatever you do," she shouted over her shoulder. "Do NOT open that door under any circumstances!"

Inside the cell Kylo could feel the darkness as it circled his fingertips, caressed his bruised fist, as he pounded over and over into the steel door, shrieking with every punch.

He would *kill* him. He would rip him apart joint by joint and watch gleefully as he fed the bits to a rathtar. This *thing* who thinks he can lay hands on everything that belongs to him...*yes,* even that old crone. No, not crone, *princess,* and he put his common, filthy hands on her.

Kylo was screaming now as he slammed his other fist into the plated wall. *Gods... when did these fits come back?*

His knuckles were split and as he ran his hands along the walls with a cry, he smeared the blood in a grotesque cascade, creating grisly prints that slid down the wall as he collapsed into a corner of the room. His arms were shaking, and as he raised the balls of his hands to his face, he cried.

—

Rey, sitting in the waiting room, felt like it was all an illusion. Surely she'd wake up, back in that damn wasteland, to a face-full of cool, black cloth and the steady beating of a heart not her own beneath her ear. When had those things become so familiar? They'd been stranded for only a week, but it had felt like ages...

*This* was her true place. These people, this mission...stop the First Order. Stop Kylo Ren. Although Kylo wasn't much of a problem anymore. He was here. Somewhere. She felt the back of her neck grow cold.
"Is he dead already? Did they just take him inside and shoot him?"

Her eyes grew wide when she felt, suddenly, a familiar ghostly tugging and the heat surged back into her. *He's fine,* she concluded, and breathing out, she quickly pushed away his presence.

When General Organa finally arrived, Poe was at her side. She seemed a little shaken, but when she laid her eyes on Rey, it all seemed to melt away from her. Leia pulled her close into a motherly embrace and Rey, needy of that comfort, sunk into her arms.

"Oh Rey…I'm so happy to see you. Especially in one piece. Come inside," she invited, and the door to her office slid open.

"If it's alright, General, I have some things to see to," Poe said, and as Rey looked back at him, she noticed with curiosity the solemn look on his face.

"Yes, that's perfectly alright. Thank you, Poe," she smiled slightly at him. "I mean that."

With a quick nod, he left the two of them alone, and the door slid shut with a soft click behind him. Leia gave a large sigh.

"Well you've been through quite an ordeal," she said, pushing back in her chair. "Tea? I know I could use some."

Rey fumbled with her hands in her lap. "Yes, please," she said quietly. "If…it's not too much trouble."

Leia's brows rose. "Not at all. None at all. Ever. Not after a week stranded with him." she said pointedly, and took a preheated kettle in hand and began to pour into two simple mugs.

Rey tried not to wince. She knew she'd have to talk about Kylo, but a part of her wished she could just have a little time- just a day, maybe, to process it all. So many things had happened, so much seemed to have changed…

Leia handed over the mug with a careful warning and Rey took a sip.

"It's peppermint. I hope that's ok." Rey scrunched her face at the minty flavor. She'd never tasted anything like it before. Staring into her mug, she took another cautious, trying sip. Maybe it wasn't too bad. "It's fine," she replied finally, and forced a small smile onto her face. Leia smiled back.

"I was just down to see…him," she said slowly.

"Oh?" Rey replied conversationally.

"Yes. He nearly beat down the door."

Leia swirled her tea and stared pensively at a spot on her desk. She took in a deep breath.

"Never mind that, though. He's not your problem anymore. He'll meet the committee in the morning," she said finally, and took a sip from her mug.

Rey lowered her own mug to her lap, wrapping her fingers around its warmth. "Committee?"

"Mhmm," she said, and when she looked up at Rey again, her eyes caught onto the striking swirl of black fabric wrapped around her shoulders. She said nothing, and took another sip of tea.

"It's a preliminary hearing. They're working now to create a list of things to charge him with. As
you can imagine, it's going to be quite extensive."

Rey sat still in her seat and stared downward. Leia's brow flickered slightly as she set her cup onto a holder on her desk.

"I…know I said it was done with," Leia began, "but do you mind if I ask what exactly happened out there?"

Rey's eyes lifted to meet the older woman's before her and she blinked.

"Since it involved a Resistance ship, I'm afraid you'll have to file a report anyway explaining how it got wrecked, but considering it was found physically fused to a First Order TIE it takes no leap of the imagination to realize he was involved. Or even caused it."

Rey gripped her cup. "He did," she admitted. Leia nodded and her eyes drifted back to the cowl around her shoulders.

"But he doesn't seem to have been a completely terrible companion for the past few days," she began conversationally. "I see he's given you something."

Rey frowned up at her. "What?"

Leia motioned at her neck and Rey looked down, instantly bringing a hand to grip Kylo's cowl.

"Oh," she muttered.

"He asked for you, you know…" she began, and when Rey looked back at her, Leia's eyes took on a strange, almost dream-like quality. It felt familiar. "When I told him you were off limits, he seemed to handle it well enough," she continued, picking back up her mug, "But when Poe came to tell me you were waiting for me, that's when the temper tantrum began," she said with a half-hearted smirk.

Rey stared at her, unsure of what to say.

"I heard Poe was the first one to recognize you when you both came in. Is that correct?"

Rey nodded.

"He told me on the way up here that he was very excited to see you and anxious to get you away from him, is that true?"

Rey blinked, but nodded again.

"Yeah, he didn't react well to a repeat performance of that," she said with a slight laugh and replaced her cup on the table.

"I'm sorry?" Rey asked, confused. Leia swallowed and waved her hand away with a frown.

"Never mind it. It's alright. We'll find a way to deal with him. Everybody's a little over-excited today."

Rey carefully lifted her still full mug and put it gently on the edge of the desk in front of her.

"What's going to happen to him?" she asked quietly. Taking in a deep breath, Leia leaned back into her chair, her eyes narrowed in thought.
"I don't know," she said honestly. "He's got a few options in front of him right now. Knowing what we know...what I know of how he got to be this way, he could choose to use it to his advantage and try to swing a deal with the knowledge he has of the Order or..."

Rey stared at her, and Leia felt a twinge of sympathy as she watched the girl seemingly hang on her every word. "Or he could choose to blow it all to hell. That path would almost certainly lead to execution."

Rey felt lightheaded, and she saw again the red streaks fly across the sky of Takodana, the wraithe from her vision come to life in the forest, the youthful and deceptively handsome face of her captor and pursuer and companion....she closed her eyes and let go a heavy sigh.

"Why did he give that to you, Rey?"

When she looked up, Leia's eyes were soft, understanding, and she wondered absently in the back of her mind how she had seen such similar eyes look at her with fire, fury, possessiveness...

"He said..." she began, "It was to block out the sun. I was so burnt the first couple days, but after we got our supplies, he gave this to me," she continued. *And he insisted he put on the paste that healed me,* her mind rattled on in silence. "It worked."

Leia, hands now folded beneath her chin, gave a small smile and nodded.

"You can go now, Rey."

Giving a small, vague smile of her own, she nodded.

When she exited the office, a cheery, helpful assistant greeted her in the same room she'd been waiting in and led Rey on a small tour- the canteen, the command center, the community 'fresher.

"But you don't need to worry too much about that," she supplied with a giant grin. "The General's given you your own private quarters. It's not often we have a Jedi on base!"

*But I'm not a Jedi*... Rey thought.

She was so tired, and this woman was so chipper. She almost couldn't stand it. But she smiled back where she could, and soon she was standing in front of what was to be her own door.

"Just press your hand here..." she instructed, carefully taking Rey's wrist and pressing it to the panel. "Aaand there we go! All set!"

With a final overly-enthusiastic greeting and a short wave, the woman was gone, and Rey stepped into her own room. It was fairly spacious, with a retracting bed that added tremendously to its utility. Pressing a button along the wall revealed a small but more than sufficient refresher, with a good sized stall and adequate facilities. Leaning her head against the cool tile, she nearly cried.

Slowly she began to strip off her old, tattered clothing, letting the black cowl fall from her fingers and onto the floor with her own grays, and slipped underneath the spray. The cool water felt heavenly against her sun-abused skin, sucking some of the heat of the past week out with it, and she scrubbed vigorously at every inch of herself. She wanted every speck of that planet off of her skin, she told herself, but it wasn't just the planet on her anymore...*that* would not scrub off.

She was too exhausted to think about that now.

Finally clean, she cheered herself up at the thought of getting to see Finn properly tomorrow, at
having a meal that wasn't rations, at finally catching up on what the Resistance has been up to while she's been away training and traipsing around on some gods-forsaken planet. Pulling on a long, oversized shirt she found in the dresser drawers, she slipped beneath the generous covers and let these positive thoughts swim through her. As she curled up under the sheets, however, she shivered. She was so cold.

_They are used to space_, she reasoned. _I am from the desert._

It wasn't their fault—this is the temperature they were used to. But even on Ahch-to, Rey had slept with her little dwelling fairly open to nature and this base, deep within the bedrock of an admittedly sweltering planet, was kept very, very cool.

She turned around in bed and faced the wall. Reaching out a hand, her fingertips brushed against the slick paint that coated her quarters, and she found that, too, was cold. And her sheets and blanket were too light.

Pushing back to the center of the bed and curling up around herself, she insisted she didn't miss it. She didn't miss the veritable furnace of that body that had agreed to keep her warm in the nightly freeze. She didn't miss its breath in her hair or its arms like warm yet pliant steel, heavy, unmoving, around her back. She wouldn't tug on that rope that hovered now behind her closed eyelids. She didn't miss it. She _didn't_.

Chapter End Notes

We are into act 3 and man am I excited to be here. This is the longest fic I've ever done by a long-shot, and we're still not nearly done yet. I'm excited. I hope you're excited, too.

HOOO MYGOD, So much to go through right now, though!!

>>>FIRSTLY: This story has gotten its first piece of fan art, done for ch. 18, and I tear up every time I look at it. You can find it here:
http://gwendy85.tumblr.com/post/143168309313

I'm still grinning stupidly whenever I look at it, and thanks so much to GWENDY for deigning to spare a bit of her wonderful talent on this story. I mean that a lot.

>>>SECONDLY: There's been such a massive influx of commenters last chapter, and I want to thank each and every one of your beautiful faces for sharing your thoughts with me—your words are mana in the fanfiction desert. So a very THOROUGH thanking to Starships, Allison, g_girl143 (GWENDY!!), PoorQueequeg, missjewels, Raxephan, ivylovesnarry, Karla, midnightplanets, Chai (!!), All_The_Feels, reylobase, rachel_greatest, Jinga, Nina10, MeowloRen, The_Dark_Becomes_You, DauntlessSubconscious, rmytler, arw5205, nareno, Just A Human, Anna, Megan lynn, and Ellensama.

You guys have literally made my WEEK, did you know that? Because every time my email lit up with an alert, it gave me an excuse to smile like an idiot. Thanks so much for your kindness, and to ALL of you who read this crazy fic—here's to act 3.
I Dreamed a Dream

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

MOTHER

You are joy
My sun
You are sorrow
My moon

Don't forget
Your goodnight kiss

Please, take me with you
Don't leave me here alone
In the twinkle of an eye
Everything will disappear

I dreamed a dream
I was raping
I dreamed a dream
I was killing

Don't forget
Your goodbye kiss

Please, hold me close
So tight I can't breathe
Please, tell me it's a lie
Tell me it's all a dream
Please, take me with you
Don't leave me here alone
In the twinkle of an eye
Everything will disappear

Don't forget
Your goodnight kiss

Melt
And disappear...

You are joy
My sun
I want to melt into you
My moon

[Lyrics: Atsushi Sakurai for 'The Mortal'
Translation by This Is Not Greatest Site with minor KS/TATFS adjustments]
Kylo sat in the corner of his room, hands covered in his own blood as it weeped from his battered knuckles, and he brooded dangerously from beneath his tangle of hair. His hate had leveled out to a blanket disgust for everything and it worked beautifully to keep his mind at a low hum instead of an overwhelming cacophony of thoughts and feelings. When the lights clicked off, his head jerked up to look around him. It was pitch black with nothing but a dim blue glow emanating from the tiny window in his door.

He sighed and leaned his head back against the wall behind him with a dull thud. He tried to close his eyes, tried to ignore the throbbing in his hands, to ignore the tightness in his chest and the creeping nausea in his stomach. They never brought him a meal. He didn't really blame them. He'd probably have killed whoever walking in through the door, doing to them what he so desperately wanted to do to that damned pilot. He sighed again against the dark of the room and absently licked at the corner of his mouth.

He couldn't sleep. And he thought of Rey. He looked down at his arms propped up atop his knees, and although he couldn't see them, couldn't see himself, if he tried, pressed his eyes closed tight enough, he could almost feel the rough wool of her clothing beneath his hands.

"Rey…" he murmured into the black.

He covered his face with his hands again and waited out the night.

—

Rey collected her caf in the morning with shadows under her eyes. Her exhaustion had won her a couple standard hours of sleep, brushing against her almost like a caress, but then the nightmares crept in again. She'd been free of them the past few days- the one bit of grace she seemed to have been allowed during the latter half of her traipe in the wastes- but they had come back for her with a vengeance.

She'd been alone, seven years old again, sleeping with a rough cover at the back of Plutt's shop- her home for years before she found her AT-AT. She didn't know why he let her stay there, but she always tried to make herself as small as possible in the corner of his work shack. She never touched anything, not even out of curiosity. She knew what the consequences of that were.

The fear from those memories came rushing back like a fresh wound and it twisted her stomach making it almost impossible to eat. Almost.

She forced herself to take up some breakfast bread with her caf. She sat down at an empty table and was startled when Finn suddenly sidled up next to her.

"Hey!" he said cheerily, setting down his tray with a clank. Rey nearly jumped.

"Whoa, whoa, it's alright. It's just me," he said comfortingly, resting a hand against her upper back. Rey smiled. Tried to.

"How have you been holding up?" he asked her, digging into his breakfast. A strange blue cream took up a good portion of his plate along with a bit of bread and a smidge of protein. Rey sipped her caf and cradled it carefully in her hands.

"I'm doing alright," she lied. She held onto her smile but sighed warily. Finn peered up at her from over his utensil.

"You don't look alright," he commented between chews. His eyes flickered to and from her face and she pressed her fingers against the heat of her mug.
"Well, it's been a long week. I imagine it'll take me a few days to recover," she tried to say lightly.

A week. They had told her that's all she had been gone for. She still wasn't sure she believed them, but when she went back to try and count the sunsets from her memory it seemed to be correct. A week. It had felt like a year. A year of walking into bleak nothingness. A week of heated conversations that somehow always ended in her learning something despite the man she argued with and rough black draped around her at night. She shook her head as that last thought threatened to creep up on her again.

No, it had felt so much longer than that.

Finn frowned as he watched her in silence but decided to say nothing as he scooped a bit more of the blue cream onto a slice of bread and took a bite.

"Did he, ah…." he began, casually taking a sip of water. "Did he do anything to you at all?" he said finally, as if it were the most conversational thing in the world.

Rey's eyes darted immediately to his and as Finn caught her gaze, he watched her eyes harden. He scraped at his plate with his utensil without looking away.

"No," she said flatly. "No, he did nothing. Not unless you count causing the situation to begin with. But when we were together, no."

"Together?"

Rey's brow flickered, missing his comment entirely. "Actually I'd probably be dead if it hadn't been for him. Or I could have died anyway when his ship crashed on top of mine."

Rey sighed and ran her hands up her face, digging her fingers into her hair as she stared at the table. "Or I'd probably be scarred if he hadn't been so careful in raiding that camp. Or I'd've been fine anyway if he'd never even—"

Rey gritted her teeth and knocked her elbows into the table, rattling the cutlery. Some people eating nearby glanced for a moment in their direction, but Finn just smiled back at them as Rey stared avidly at a particular spot on the table. In Rey's mind, the contradictions jangled around in her head like loose bolts trapped inside a speeder. As he looked at her, he wasn't sure what to say. He got the feeling she wasn't really talking to him anymore but to herself. He crashed his ship on top of hers?

Rey sat up suddenly, freeing her head as she breathed deeply in. "I'm sorry, I have to go," she said, rising to her feet. She picked up her mug.

Finn looked up at her in mild surprise and gave a slight nod. "Alright…look," he began. "This afternoon, Poe's gonna have me run some flight simulators. You should come and watch. You're a pro at them, right?" and as he looked up at her, he flashed her a very deliberate wide grin.

Rey, feeling herself drawn back into the present, looked down at him and his expression warmed her a bit. She gave a small smile in return. "I'd like that," she said with a nod.

Finn's eyes lit up and he nodded back. "See you there then."

As Rey turned to leave, she heard his voice again. "Rey? Are you sure you're alright?"

Looking over her shoulder, she gave him the biggest smile she could manage. "I'll be ok."

She put her mug into the bin and slipped through the cantina door.
I'm not ok.

A slot he hadn't been aware of had popped open at the bottom of his door early in the morning and a tube of ready-to-eat rations was slid on a steel plate into his cell.

No utensils…no sharp edges, Kylo mused. He was loath to eat it, but words about reasonably acceptable behavior, or something, equalling some time in the refresher had begun to repeat in his head so he reached down and quickly made work of the tasteless paste.

A few hours later they had come for him, several men in body armor, as they hauled him to his feet. His escort was the same number as the day before, but not even their numbers, he noticed, were enough to give them complete courage in his presence. When he flicked back his head to shift his dirt-clotted hair away from his eyes, he noticed a few of them flinch.

The base was active now, and as they passed through the corridor, it widened into a common artery and he watched from the corner of his eye as the traitorous Resistance adherents peered at him, some pressing against the walls to let them pass, and he snickered.

"Move along," one of his guard spoke gruffly, prodding him in the back with his weapon. Touching at the edge of the guard's mind, he found his name, his hobbies…his fears. I'll remember you, he thought outwardly, knowing the man was too deaf in the Force to hear him. He didn't care, though, and as he glared behind him, he continued on in silence until they passed a particular hallway and his head snapped in its direction.

Rey…

His step faltered, and that bastard was at it again, hitting him in the back, but he heard nothing from her. He stifled a whimper and swore to any long-forgotten deities that still listened that he would bludgeon this poor fool's brains against the wall if he laid a hand on him one more time, but they were there. When the door slid open, his head turned quickly towards it in surprise and they stepped into a large, white debriefing room.

His eyes took a moment to adjust to the brightness of everything. How the Resistance, and the Rebellion before it, had ever thought all white facilities were a wise decorating choice he had never been able to fathom.

His guard fanned out around him, keeping him in the center of the perimeter they formed, and as he looked up, he could see the panel gathered before him between the two men at his front. He stood there, cuffed, clothing ragged, covered in dirt and now also old blood. He flexed his battered hands cautiously and a loud sigh interrupted the silence.

"Somebody get him out of here." said his mother, "Clean him up- we can't do things like this," and he flexed his hand hard, breaking open one of the scabs again.

"He chose to not keep the peace when he arrived. He must go through the proceedings as he is," said an unfamiliar voice.

"I'm not going to sit here for two hours and stare at him looking like he just waded through a Hutt's mudbath. He has untreated wounds anyway and there are such things as prisoners rights. I move to postpone until this afternoon."

"Prisoners rights? For him?"
Leia sat up in her chair, leaned over, and fixed her counterpart with a no-nonsense stare. "For any prisoner. It's the law."

There were several bouts of coughing and a few minutes of low murmuring until it was decided he would get his three minutes in the 'fresher, and a couple of bacta packs for his hands. He stood there awkwardly, running his fingers along the edges of his busted knuckles when the shine of his shackles glared up into his eyes. He winced away at first, but when he adjusted the reflection, an image of himself shone back up at him and his lip curled. No, he didn't blame her. He had already felt disgusting but now he was absolutely sure of it, and a strange sensation started to creep over him.

*Thank you,* he whispered across the Force to her. Even in the midst of the bubbling discussion of the room, he felt her go still with shock, and then felt again as the emotion became razor sharp.

*Don't you dare,* she whispered back. "Get him out of here," she said aloud, "We reconvene in two standard hours."

As they led him away, he had to suppress an ironic laugh. Whatever he imagined it would be like to be captured by the Resistance, it had never come close to this... *domesticity*... as his mother dictated who he could and could not see and ordered him to essentially take a bath. Neither did he fathom the unregimented flow of people that made up the Resistance base, and he knew if Hux could see it, see how people went wherever they wanted in a great flood of humanity, he'd be in tears.

When they reached an offshoot of yet another featureless corridor, they opened the door to a small room with nothing in it, shoved him in, threw a towel at him, and barked at him to show his hands. They released the shackles, and Kylo sighed in relief as he rubbed at his chafing wrists.

"Don't get too excited. You have approximately 60 seconds to get out of whatever it is you call that getup and fix yourself however you deem appropriate for the refresher. They will then be going back on. Is that understood?"

Kylo glanced up at the man as his hand closed around his battered wrist. "Crystal," he croaked, and the door slammed shut. Standing there alone, he swung his arms once, twice, three times, tried to stretch them, and then quickly stripped out of his clothing leaving nothing but his undershorts as he flung the towel over his arm.

Just as the man had said, 60 seconds later, there was a banging rap on the door and it swung open again.

"Present your hands," he grunted.

"Is that really necessary?" Kylo said lightly.

"Present them!"

Kylo's mouth twisted as he flung the towel over his shoulder and held out his arms. He bit down on his tongue as the shackles clicked shut and rubbed at his wrists all over again.

"You're to be given ten minutes in the refresher. After that, a member of medstaff will see you," he was informed.

"I thought it was supposed to be three?"

The man cleared his throat as he pulled Kylo through the door and back into the guard perimeter.
"They made it ten."

Kylo watched as the door to the room he'd been in was pulled closed. "What about my clothes?" he asked as he was pushed forward.

"You'll be provided standard issue garments," the guard replied, and suddenly found himself taking in his prisoner's height and width with dismay.

The situation was awkward to say the least. Soldiers flanked him as the steam rose from the water and Kylo looked to either side of him, partly in disbelief that they still insisted on surrounding him here of all places. He opened his mouth to say something but only felt a spike of anger drive into him instead.

Looking down at his undershorts and back at the welcoming spray of water, he made up his mind and threw down his towel to walk strait in. *They insist on giving me new clothing anyway...*

He was provided one all-purpose gel, and as he looked down the row of showers he noticed they all had the same. Somewhere deep down he felt his entitlement start to fester, but as he looked down at the drain he saw the dirt slide off him and into the tiny whirlpool below. The water ran down his face, droplets streaming down his nose.

"Stay still, Ben! Mommy's got to get this spot and—"

"DSHHH!" he hissed, his tiny hands plunging the toy ship into the water with a gigantic splash, sending a wave of water right into his mother's face. His eyes grew wide as he stared at her, her own eyes closed and her arms hanging limply over his tub as the bathwater dripped down her pleasant features. Suddenly, she opened one eye and scrunched up her face at him.

"I'm gonna get you for that."

Ben squealed.

"I'm gonna get you!"

"Nooo!" he cried, dissolving into fits of laughter as his mother started sending tiny splashes at him and in revenge he smacked is toy ship over and over into the water to add to the chaos when a deep voice called out from the next room.

"What's going on in here?"

A familiar lopsided grin…

Kylo's eyes flared open. Gritting his teeth, he reached out his infuriatingly cuffed hands to feel for the wall and steady himself.


Still staring at the tiled floor, he felt for the container and pumped the gel vigorously into his palm.

*Nothing to be done about it.*

With a low growl that gained the attention of his guard, he smacked the soaped up hand into his hair and began to rub vigorously, his shackles hitting into him. He scrubbed so hard at his head he wouldn't have been surprised if his scalp bled, and rubbed quickly over every other inch of his body that he could, careful to still get where the fabric of his undershorts clung but still afforded
some cover from prying, selfish eyes.

He was grateful for the water, because he could still see that young, pretty face grinning at him with her scrunched up nose. Grateful for it because it covered up the kind that currently blurred his vision and that he couldn't seem to stop because the memories started to trickle back to him now.

That ship—it had been a model copy of the most recent kind his father had acquired, and he'd been furious when Ben had loved it so much he insisted on taking it with him everywhere—even into the bath. And it became a bath toy ever after. His mother had just rolled her eyes and smiled.

*Mother.*

The moments trickled back to him, like the water that swirled around the drain.

—

Rey hurried back to her quarters and, panting, locked the door behind her. She ran her fingers through her hair, mussing it and pulling up tufts from its loops completely before finally slumping down to sit on her bed.

What was the matter with her?

Rey tried to catalogue everything that was wrong. She'd learned long ago to be her own diagnosan as she couldn't afford a proper one unless she was absolutely certain she was dying.

Part of her still didn't comprehend how she had gotten to this point. Sure, the parts about training on Ahch-to, discovering a panic-inducing bond shared with her enemy, and then having to lure him away ultimately to a week-long standoff in a wasteland made sense—that she could parse. But that was just the skeleton of the problem.

The parts of it worth picking out for examination, well…whenever she tried to think about it, her head hurt.

*How can someone live with so many contradictions?* she screamed in her mind.

She twisted her face in pained frustration, and just as she was about to give up, she opened her eyes and spotted it. Her pile of ruined clothing still laid in a heap outside the refresher door and underneath lay a thin flutter of black.

Her breath came back to her, and almost without her realizing, Rey found herself starting to stand and slowly, she walked towards the discarded garments. She felt calm, unerringly so after the stress of that morning, and reaching down, her fingertips brushed against the fabric before grabbing it in her fist and pulling it free.

Seeing it in the light, it was just as dirty as the rest of her things, the black color hiding the pale dust little, but she ran her fingers along it anyway. Absently, she took her fingernail and lightly scraped free a bit of caked dirt.

Out of everything in the room, *this* felt normal. The texture beneath her fingertips was almost comforting, and slowly she raised it to her face. When she inhaled, she felt her brain seize. It smelled like the wastes, but just beneath that…that same smell of musky earth.

*Rey…?*

Her breath sputtered in her chest as her eyes grew wide and she slammed the cowl to the floor. His
voice clung to her ears like an echo.

"How did yo—"

Her eyes snapped to her door as she felt a familiar something just on the other side. She moved forward, her conscious mind unwilling to accept why as she followed the compulsion to hit the door release and step out into the hall. The tug at the back of her mind pulled her to the left, so she followed it. She walked quickly past the occasional person she met, and then broke out into a run. When she hit the open atrium, it suddenly went slack. She was lost.

She looked around herself, hoping for some sign or new direction, but when none came she blinked once, twice, and then looked around at the busy people going back and forth through the various hallways and passages.

*How did I get here?*

Rey frowned, feeling dizzy all of the sudden, and raised a hand to her forehead. People started to stare, and as her frown grew deeper, she headed quickly back to her room.

With the door safely closed once more she kept it at her back, her fingertips pressed against its cold steel, as she eyed warily the place where the black fabric had tumbled to the floor. She narrowed her eyes at it.

"Why do I feel terrible?" she glared.

The fabric didn't respond.

Stomping over, she snatched it up off of the ground and sat hard on the bed causing the supports to make a mild squeak. She ran her fingers over it, through it, and sighed.

"Why do I feel terrible?" she pleaded with it again, and leaning her head back, she fell over onto her pillow and curled herself into a ball.

"I don't have to see them until this afternoon," she said quietly aloud. "I can do whatever I want…"

Clutching the fabric to her chest, she tucked her head in close, just enough to let her breath pass through it, and tried desperately to find peaceful sleep.

—

He sat before the panel in a standard issue black sleeveless shirt and dark brown pants that were one size too small for him. A comb had been denied when he ask so his hair hung somewhat disheveled around his face. Between his hair and his scar, he mused, he felt like he might as well have been wearing some sort of disguise.

He felt a faint tingling at the back of his neck, and when he twisted his head up he found Leia looking straight at him.

As the spokesman for the panel began to speak, the General heard none of it. All she had space for was the man- no longer a boy- sitting before her, and she found herself cataloging the little things that only a mother would bother noticing. He'd gotten even taller, the seat they provided him looking almost comical compared to his broad frame and long limbs. It suddenly occurred to her that it was almost shocking that the little baby that had come from her own body had grown to such a size, and she could see him now, tiny and perfect, tucked in the crook of her arm as he gurgled contentedly up at her. He'd been such a good baby. Never cried unnecessarily.
As her gaze drifted lower, she noticed the length of the pants they had given him and scoffed.

"General? Did you have something to add?" the spokesperson said to her, eyes hooded.

Leia blinked in surprise as she was pulled abruptly out of her thoughts. "No," she said, clearing her throat. "Please continue."

As they turned back to continue with protocol she looked back at the prisoner and found him smirking at her from beneath his long bangs. Her mouth twisted.

*How has it come to this…I tried so hard. So hard…* she thought to herself, and her eyes traced over the thin white scar that peeked from underneath his hair and dragged the length of his face. Inwardly she winced, and suddenly before her eyes she saw her son, about three years old, a familiar but long-forgotten toy starship clutched in his tiny hand as a younger version of herself worked to pry his other hand from her clothing.

"*I'm sorry, Ben, but mommy's got to go back to work.*"

"*But I don't WANT you t' go!*" the child pleaded, and his mother merely shook her head testily.

"*Ben, please, I'll be back soon, I promise. It's just for a little while, alright? I'll see you in a couple days.***"

"*Mommy I'm scared!*" he shouted, tears rimming his eyes.

"*Ben, don't be ridiculous- there's nothing to be afraid of. Everything's still the same, see? I'll see you soon.*"

Leia stifled a gasp and Kylo stared at her in shaky satisfaction.

*What went wrong?* he mused to himself, holding his thoughts tightly inside. *I'll show you what went wrong…*

Almost like an assault Kylo pawed through every memory Ben Solo ever had where his mother had left him just as the shadows in his head had started to close in. Suddenly he was five and screaming clutching to her leg as a nanny had to drag him off of her as he begged her not to leave- he tried to tell her he wasn't allowed to sleep when she went away, but he had trouble finding the words. Then he was eight, his face buried in her chest as he sobbed for her not to go again- and every time she was pulling down his arms telling him he had to be a big boy now. When he was eleven his mother stared in mild shock as her son just stood there, his face blank- no tears, no screaming, just a simple, "*Goodbye mom. Have a good trip.*"

She'd thought he'd finally grown up a bit. She'd thought everything would be alright. But as these moments streamed past her, Kylo pried them open to reveal what laid beneath: phantoms hovering in the corners of his nursery like tall spectres no one could ever manage to see but him, whispers that floated around his head whenever he was the only one in a room, conversations and promises spoken into the dark telling him who he was, what he was, what his true lineage is. And how the only way to attain what was rightfully his was to kill for it, and all the while she was never ther—

"*Ben, STOP IT!*" Leia screamed, jumping to her feet and sending the chair behind her clattering to the overly polished floor.

The entire room was shocked into silence as tears streamed unbidden down the woman's cheeks and the prisoner sat leaned forward, looking as if he were ready to pounce. No one said a word.
"Who's 'Ben'?” came his strained voice.

Leia panted. "You know very well who,” she insisted.

Languidly he leaned back into his chair, his cuffed hands falling casually between his legs, but the bitterness rolled off of him in nauseating waves. "I'm afraid you must be mistaken, General.”

Leia was exasperated. "Ben—"

Kylo shot back to the edge of his chair. "Ben is DEAD!” he barked, and instantly the guards around him pounced, yanking him back against the seat back and pointing several blasters at his head. Leia gasped, reaching out a hand towards them before realizing what she was doing and smoothly bringing it back down again in one fluid motion. She winced as they yanked him still.

"General Organa?” said a soft voice at her shoulder, and the woman next to her looked at her with questioning but sympathetic eyes. Leia was at a loss for words.

"While they…rattle off the list," came his voice again. "Why don't you tell them?"

She looked at him stunned and felt a flicker of those images still linger at the back of her mind. She said nothing.

He tilted his head as he watched her, and slowly looked at each member of the panel in turn. Poor Ben… he thought absently. The memories had shaken him more than he’d anticipated. She had shaken him more than he’d anticipated. Suddenly his head was filled with toy ships and smiles and crying and that thing. He closed his eyes tight, willing that last shadow back into its box far away, for his own sake, before opening them again and burning a hole straight into her.

"Tell them how you left me when the darkness began to close in. How you turned your back even as the Supreme Leader welcomed me.”

Leia shook her head in distress. "That's not what happened!” she cried.

"Tell them!” he screamed "Tell them how you ignored the desperate pleas of a little boy who just wanted the nightmares to stop, and how you and that pathetic excuse for a husband couldn't stop yelling at each other long enough to—"

"That is enough!” a deep voice boomed through the chamber, and an older man, Major Caluuan Ematt, stood before them. He fixed Kylo with a stern look which Kylo met with more than equal intensity as his lip twitched and his hands strained in his shackles. Turning back to the General, Major Ematt's expression softened slightly.

"Leia, is there any truth to his words?” he said quietly, fingers balanced on the table before him.

"What?” she gasped in disbelief, and she looked away, her face stricken.

Ematt raised a brow with a sigh and looked about the room. "It goes without saying," he said, letting his voice carry, "that whatever goes on in a hearing does not leave it. This will now apply exponentially so as I am sealing into strictest confidentiality the entirety of this case. Anyone who so much as whispered what goes on today will be subject to the toughest penalties allowed by the law. Have I made myself clear?"

No one spoke, but there was a visible shuffling throughout the room.

Major Ematt looked back at Leia who stared now, clearly lost to herself and to the past,
unblinkingly at the floor.

"It's clear that in order to make a sound judgement that we will need all the necessary pieces of evidence first. Until then..." his eyes drifted to the prisoner.

"Kylo Ren," he called, and Kylo glanced up at him from the worn out figure of his mother with a glare. "Consider this your final warning against unruly behavior. Whatever your feelings towards Leia Organa, they are meaningless in the face of the law. Is what I'm saying making sense to you?"

Kylo let his eyes drifted off to the side as he bit lightly at the corner of his lip.

"Answer," the major barked, "Or discover the first taste of the consequences I just warned you about."

Kylo looked at him again and had to suppress the urge to laugh suddenly. This entire situation was absurd and he had no idea what this man hoped to play at.

"I hear you," he replied finally, raising his brows, and the man frowned back at him as he was forced to accept the partial acknowledgement.

And just like that, the hearing ended, and he was quickly being pulled up to his feet and back down the corridors to his cell in the bowels of the base.

As the door slammed shut behind him, Kylo stumbled over to his thin cot and fell into it, rubbing his face into the coarse fabric with a pained sigh. When his eyes closed he saw his mother's face again and her repeated denials burned into him, old wounds that threatened to open up and devour him completely. He was so exhausted, though. And yet utterly terrified of sleep.

I know what waits for me if I try... he told himself. He'd been feeling the tug inside of his skull for days now, and out of both fear and self-preservation he'd tried to wall himself up from it. It was only in the wastes that he'd ever successfully pushed the sensation away long enough to actually sleep. But there was a bounty on his head. He knew this. Certain people were furious with him.

Everyone is furious with me, he inwardly chuckled to himself, but then a sob broke through his chest. This was it- what he had held back out of vehement contempt for the woman who gave birth to him came flooding into him now and the tears flowed down his cheeks. He did his best to silence it, pride and the idea of anybody outside hearing him holding him back from weeping openly, but the tears he could not stop.

In the back of his mind, a voice absently commented, Well it's better than destroying a room, but he wasn't sure he totally agreed with that. At least slicing his flickering saber through the steel of a ship (or a base) held some primal release he was never able to really recreate anywhere else.

Practical and utterly impractical thoughts, like these, passed easily through his mind, as if a filter had been removed, and his chest felt deathly tight as he rolled over to face the wall.

He was exhausted and everything hurt. No, there would be no sleeping. He was alone now. Sleeping was dangerous.

—

Rey's baggy regulation trousers, at least one size too big, hung off of her hips but at least hid the bulge of balled up black fabric in her pocket. Rey hadn't slept when she went back to her room, but she'd gotten up as promised that afternoon anyway. Instead, as she had felt her exhaustion try and tug her down, a shock had run through her so profound she was very nearly sick. The only thing
she could do was crawl off her bed and lay against the cool of the floor in hope of some relief.

This time, when the misery, self-loathing, contempt, and abject hatred for all things had rolled over her, she knew where it was coming from.

Clutching his cowl in her hands, she had held it against her mouth to try and stifle the sobs that shivered through her.

"Please…please," she had begged, whispering into it. "Whatever they're doing…don't let them get to you, please. I can't take it, I can't—"

And just like before, it had abruptly stopped.

As Rey walked slowly into the hangar and towards the small group of people gathered around what appeared to be a monitor, she brushed her fingers against it in her pocket and stuffed it in deep. It was becoming something of a talisman- if it could somehow make the pain go away, maybe it could do other things, too. Rey knew thinking of it like that was absurd, but she had very little to lose.

"Rey! You made it!" cried Poe as he laid eyes on her, and he pushed his way through the crowd before finally resting a friendly hand on her shoulder. "He's just in the middle of the next simulation now. You wanna watch? I think he could use a few pointers- he crashed on the last one," he said with a sly grin.

"It wasn't me!" cried Finn, eyes glued onto the simulator screen. He jerked the joystick sharply and gave a very odd squeak when the ship started to dive and he worked desperately to recover. Advice started being shouted at him from those gathered and Rey grinned. This would be a good distraction.

Although the time on the simulator was meant to help Finn train, a few others took a go at it as well. Some of them were experienced pilots, showing off and then excusing themselves profusely whenever something went wrong. "It's just a simulator! If it were real that wouldn't have happened!" A few who had never flown before in their lives also tried with some heavy coaching from Poe.

Rey thought back to her AT-AT still sitting somewhere on Jakku and her little computer she'd built from scratch with components she'd carefully cleaned and repaired to allow herself her one luxury. So many nights, and sandstorms, spent on her outdated simulator program when she could spare the electricity- nothing like the sophisticated one being played in front of her- and she smiled rather wistfully at how it had all somehow managed to pay off.

"Do you want to give it a go, Rey?"

She blinked, pulling herself out of her mind and back into the present. "Oh…" she began, and she watched awkwardly as all eyes turned towards her. "But isn't it better for the others to get more practice?"

A cacophony of voices sprang up to tell her otherwise, and Rey found herself standing there, gripping her arms in front of herself with a sheepish grin.

"Oh alright."

They made space for her, and Finn hovered over her shoulder, eager to try and pick up anything, as she picked her ship- a light freighter- and her conditions. Rey almost instantly immersed herself, her mind slipping easily into familiar patterns. She pulled the ship to and fro as she avoided
obstacles and completed scenarios, and every now and then a gasp could be heard behind her with comments about how 'that shouldn't have worked!' amongst other things…

Rey didn't hear them, though. Her mind was locked onto the sim, and for the first time in what seemed like ages she found a kind of relief in having such a narrow focus task to do. When it ended, 'scenario complete', she felt it came much too soon.

There were pats on the back, questions. She tried to answer what she could.

"And not only that," she could hear Finn's voice waft through the group, "But Kylo Ren ran his ship into hers and she still managed to pilot it and survive. She's brilliant, I'm telling you…"

Rey felt her stomach drop. Why was he saying that? Not the brilliant part- she agreed there. But why was he bringing up him?

"Finn…" she said softly, and raised her hand to reach out to him.

"Rey, is that true?"

"Is it really true he tried to do that?"

"What a monster!"

"Don't they say he's insane? That would explain all of it!"

"Who would do such a thing? I know he's in the First Order but still…"

"Pfft, he's Kylo Ren- what did you expect?"

Rey closed her eyes, the comments and questions coming too thick and too fast for her to answer and address at once. She felt her chest start to tighten and her hand found its way into her pocket. Slowly, she stepped back from the group.

"Rey?" she heard Poe's voice call. "Rey, are you alright?"

Rey gripped the front of her shirt in her fist before quickly letting go again and trying to smooth away the resulting wrinkles like they had never happened. "I'm alright. Just a little tired all the sudden," she lied. "If it's alright…"

Poe nodded looking mildly surprised. "Of course."

Rey willed herself to smile and waved goodbye to the group. She gripped the thing in her pocket when Poe's voice called out again.

"Rey?"

Spinning around quickly, she turned to face him. "Yes?"

Motioning his head towards her, he glanced down at her hands. "What've you got there?"

As Rey looked to try and see what he saw, she spotted a small corner of black fluttering out of her pocket. She bit her lip to stifled a gasp that wanted to escape and shoved it back inside.

"It's nothing," she said with an exaggerated shrug. "Just a piece of cleaning cloth."

Poe nodded with a slight frown and Rey could feel he wasn't totally convinced.
"Anyway, I'll see ya!" she said rapidly, and quickly but measuredly left back through the hanger door and into the base.

Her mind was reeling as she made her way into the maze of corridors, but her stomach was growling. She forced herself to the cantina and ate quickly in silence.

Why did he have to mention him? Why did I even blurt out that story to begin with?

Rey felt the overwhelming urge to put her head in her hands and hide. Why did Finn do that? Couldn't he have been trusted?

But was it a secret? You're going to have to file a formal report anyway- soon it'll be common knowledge. Why did you expect him to keep it all to himself? Anyway, wasn't he using it to brag about you?

She sighed. Her thoughts were fractured, jumbled.

This is ridiculous. I have to get some sleep. I won't survive like this.

Putting away her tray, she made her way back to her quarters and for what seemed like the thousandth time that day, tried to will herself to feel sleepy. She stripped off her clothing to shuffle back on the oversized shirt from the night before and sunk into the covers.

I forgot the cowl.

She was tempted to get it, sorely tempted. With a shiver, however, she pulled the blanket close and squeezed her eyes shut.

Everything felt so far away.

"We'll be back for you, sweetheart. I promise!"

"Mama?"

"No! Come back!"

The swirling sands, the hot sun, the ship that flew up, leaving Rey forever, into the shaft of red light that became the planet-destroying beams from Starkiller Base.

"NO!"

The ship was annihilated on contact, nothing of it remained, and the dust fell back onto the surface of Jakku and became its sand.

"Come to me. Now there is no one else who can save you..." came a raspy, unfamiliar voice, and a boy with dark hair, not much younger than Rey although infinitely taller, knelt, covered in blood, before an altar. The centerpiece reeked of Darkness, of a power so old and so corrupt that not even death could stop it.

WHEEEERRREEEEE ISSSSS HEEEEEEE?

Rey screamed. She shot out of the covers, pressed her back to the wall, and desperately reached for the lights. Her blood stormed through her ears deafening her and her head felt so light she felt she might pass out. Desperate to catch her breath, she tried to still her panting but the panic still flushed through her. She looked at everything, every corner of her room. Nothing.
Slowly, the tears began to fall from her eyes as her grip relaxed on the bed. It was just a dream. Another nightmare, and yet…

Trying to sniff back her fear, she leaned over and clambered on all fours until she reached the edge of her bed. Lowering herself down, she reached for her discarded trousers and with a finger pulled them closer towards her. Slightly off balance, she eventually managed to see through the tears enough to plunge her hand into the correct pocket and come away with the cowl.

She clutched it to her, and as she lowered herself back onto the bed, she left the lights on. There would be no more sleeping tonight. She would never sleep again.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY 20th CHAPTER!! This is a rather long one. Thank you SO MUCH to everybody who's read along so far, and as always to the lovely commentors who buoy me along. A big huge chapter 20 thank you to Ellensama, ViolatheForceWhisperer, g_girl43, Just A Human, PoorQueuequeg, arw5205, Jinga, angiedec, chai, Megan, Allison, Karla, Raxephan, 13oct, CharlotteCAgain (thank you also for commenting over at ff!!), ivylovesnarry, The_Dark_Becomes_You, Nina10, All_The_Feels, Neoikeia, midnightplanets, imalwaysconfused, MeowloRen, Anna, Reylobase, Alania, and sarahmaysille.

I also got more art dedicated to this fic since last chapter. Done by the-dark-becomes-you on tumblr, you can see it here: http://these-are-the-first-steps.tumblr.com/post/143659915781/hello-my-dear-ill-color-him-in-a-bit-im

Thank you so much!!! I'm still blown over that people think this story is art worthy, even if only a little bit.

Finally, with regards to the song at the beginning, normally I do my own translations for you guys if I use Japanese songs, but This Is Not Greatest Site has such a fantastic translator that when I looked back at the Japanese for this song, there was very little I wanted to change. I also have only heard a short snippet of this song (I can't find the whole thing- the CD is only two months old) but I pretty much trust Atsushi Sakurai with my life and the lyrics were just perfect. Please do look up Buck-Tick, Atsushi's solo projects (like The Mortal), and the site This Is Not Greatest Site if you ever have a spare moment and are curious. I'm happy to provide song recs.

Thanks again for reading and being wonderful people- I'm gonna go pass out now!

EDIT 9/25/16: "Mother" is finally on youtube. Check out the song here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRPEM0zyI4w
Please…let me be…by your side

The joy of living-
    That is sorrow
When life splits open,
    What then?
This dream I won’t wake from,
    decorate it with lies-
If I’m going to do it, drink that poison
I’ll do it all, drink it down to the bottom.

Tonight in the desert
The snow flutters, twirling down
    Where did it come from?
I don’t even know…

If you exist…I want to exist too

If I had you,
    I’d also be the Devil
If I’m going to eat you
    I’ll eat you down to the bone.
This dream I won’t wake from,
    decorate it with lies-
If I’m going to do it, drink that poison
I’ll do it all, drink it down to the bottom.

Tonight in the desert
    I can’t see the moon
I keep crawling toward you
    With nowhere to go

Please…let me be…by your side

If you exist…I want to exist too

Somehow

—"Passion"
Buck-Tick
Tr: KagamiSorciere
Thank you for your patience this past month. Moving's finally done with after weeks-lasting longer than anticipated- and as soon as I get ahold of this fun illness that has apparently been building up for a year, I should be clear-headed enough to get things back on track. This stand-alone chapter is something I've wanted to do since last update, though, so please don't hate me!!

Thanks, guys. Expect something soon.
In the control room of the base, monitors flickered with the images of various passageways and hangers of the complex, including sections of the barren landscape outside. Its workers were busy but quiet at their various stations, each focused on their task of keeping an eye out for disturbances, as well as keeping the peace. Most of the images cycled through each other- a solution to there being more cameras than available monitors and staff to watch them- save for one.

"He looks like shit," a blond haired man, a bit scruffy around the beard, said to his dark haired colleague. He leaned over him lazily with an arm propped against the back of his work station chair and smirked.

"I swear he hasn't slept since he got here," the dark haired one said with a sigh. "The council's had us log everything he does, but mostly he just sits there doing nothing."

The two of them watched the monitor as Kylo Ren laid rolled over on his back on his cot, chest heaving evenly, as he blinked up at the ceiling.

"I heard there was some commotion at the hearing yesterday," he began again. "Couldn't get any details out of anybody, though."

The light haired man just shook his head. "No, seems everybody was sworn to secrecy and they're actually abiding by it this time. Shame."

They turned back to the screen as Kylo seemed to lift his arm into the air above him, make some motion with his fingers, and drop his arm again to resume his previous position. The blonde made a face.

"What a freak."

"They say he's insane," he replied. "I don't know if I agree from what I've seen, but it took getting him out of the room just to clean the blood off the walls after he beat them half to death with his fists. Apparently the General forbade anyone from going in until then. Too dangerous."

"Tsk," the blonde man chided. "I don't know why the Council's bothering. We all know what the verdict's going to be. All we can hope is that they don't seal up any more of the proceedings so the rest of us can follow along."

"You really that eager to see an execution?"

He looked down at the man in the chair and his eyes took on a cold gleam. "I lost two very dear friends in the battle on Starkiller. You bet I wanna see him hang."

"They say he's the General's son, though."

"And for that, my heart bleeds for her."

—

Rey stalked into the canteen and her eyes were rimmed with shadows, her hair in her knots just a
little uneven. Automatically she headed straight for the caf and filled her mug brimming, grabbing sweeteners and creams in careless handfuls before slouching into a seat.

"You're up early," said a familiar voice behind her. As Rey slowly turned her head, she spotted Poe smiling down at her. He set his tray a little ways away and took a seat for himself. She gave a small smile of her own in return.

"Wow Rey, you look like hell," he said with a slight frown tugging on his expression as he dug into his breakfast.

"Thanks," she replied in a groggy voice. Her fingers curled around the warmth of her mug and she brought it up to her lips to take a cautious sip.

"Everything alright?"

Rey shrugged and gripped her cup, looking out at the slowly growing occupants of the hall.

"Just having some trouble sleeping," she said casually, and turned to him with a gentle smile.

"Oh yeah?" Poe jabbed at his food a bit before scooping more onto his utensil. "Anything in particular?"

"Nightmares," she answered almost immediately. Poe raised his eyebrows in mild surprise.

"Nightmares, huh?" he pulled up his lower lip and nodded slightly. "You know, my father used to say that if you had nightmares, it meant you weren't tired enough, and if you weren't tired enough, it meant you needed to work harder." He grinned, chuckling some at the memory, and Rey grinned back.

It must be nice to have those kinds of memories… she mused.

"Maybe," she acquiesced. "I didn't do very much yesterday." Her brow creased.

"Well why don't you come down to the hangar today. Work on some ships. I've got a few that need upgrading and could use your expertise."

Rey smiled but shook her head.

"Nah, nah, it'll be fun!" he encouraged. "You know, the Resistance doesn't exactly have any sort of budget. We make do with what we can get our hands on. Someone like you, able to create things out of spare parts- you know that sort of thing is invaluable in an operation like this."

Inwardly Rey was beaming, his words definitely starting to puff up her pride, and maybe a bit of it managed to seep through her exhaustion.

With a quirk of her brow, she turned back to him.

"What kinds of ships?" she asked, and he grinned widely.

—

Kylo's head started to slump to the side as he leaned against the wall, and just as his ear brushed against his shoulder he jerked himself upright with a frightened gasp. Breathing heavily, he looked about the room, eyes wide. He nearly fell asleep that time. It was unacceptable. He bowed his head and then flung it back, hard, into the metal plated wall behind him with a shriek once, twice, until the shriek became an actual cry of pain and he stopped.
Two nights with no sleep should have been nothing, but after a week on low supplies traipsing around in a force-forsaken hellhole his body was exhausted and wasn't being allowed to recover. There was also the matter of his mental defenses- against his mother, always against Luke Skywalker, and now against Snoke….His breathing began to even out as alertness seeped back into him again, and for the thousandth time he checked through his mental defenses, felt here and there…the Supreme Leader was still looking for him, aggressively, but so far….so far he seemed to be safe.

It wouldn't be so bad if he wasn't so fucking bored.

They gave him nothing in this room to entertain himself with. Of course, why a prisoner should merit any form of pass-time was beyond his reasoning but still he wanted it. Instead he was left to sift through memories of his childhood, his mother….before he would have just slept, slipping into sweet oblivion to get away from that train of thought, but that was denied to him now.

*It's going to kill me,* going on like this….*but that's always been for the best.*

He found himself now and then, as he paced the tiny space of his cell, repeating the thoughts of Leia Organa: *How has it come to this?*

Sometimes he'd see memories of his father, the handful of good times they had, playing games, running around that old ship…Kylo found himself on his knees and falling over onto the floor in a daze, his eyes fixed on another place, another time that no one but the dead could see now, and he grabbed his knees close to his chest as the tears slipped over the bridge of his nose to plummet to the floor.

*I hate this.* *I HATE this.*

His memories occupied a lot of his time because he knew the woman that gave birth to Ben Solo would come and stand outside of his cell door sometimes, never entering, never looking through the tiny portal into his personal hell here in the bowels of the base, just hovering. She had at least left him a pair of pants that fit.

"Oh, Rey…" he whispered shakily to the empty room, and licked at the tears that came close to his mouth. He wanted to reach out to her, to feel along that cord that he still felt thick beneath his fingers, but his mind was locked up too tightly from onslaughts coming at him from every angle. The pressure on his head would become so extreme sometimes that at one point he had bashed his head so hard into the wall that his skin had caught on an uneven screw and caused him to bleed.

He imagined she was with him. Imagined she was still beside him, on the ground, out in the wastes, tucked close.

*Where she belongs.*

It had been a mistake to come here. He'd have rather taken his chances outside at this point.

*How has it come to this?*

He couldn't sleep. *Wouldn't* sleep. Sleeping was dangerous. He'd never sleep again.

—

Rey worked like a madwoman on every ship Poe threw at her. By the end of her last project, he stood back, more than impressed, and with a feeling of profound respect and professional admiration he hadn't quite had before.
"That's incredible work, Rey," the pilot said, moving to take a look over her shoulder. Rey's grin turned into a grunt as she tightened the last bolt into place.

"Anyone could do it," she demurred, "Just takes a bit of practice."

Poe smiled despite his brows wavering slightly into a skeptical expression when Finn bounded in, chattering something about needing to go back on the flight simulator and no it just couldn't wait. From the corner of her eye she could spot the pilot grinning until her friend caught a glimpse of her dirt-streaked form.

"Rey!" he shouted, instantly jogging up to them.

Rey smiled up at him in greeting and smudged a grease-sodden hand across her forehead trying to push the grimy sweat away from her eyes. Poe chuckled lightly and patted Poe on the shoulder.

"Alright, air jockey- I'll go set up," he said with a wink to the younger man and slowly ambled off to go find the flight simulator.

Rey turned briefly to go back over a few nuts and bolts, tightening and tweaking her work. She could feel Finn's eyes on her and after Poe's comments at breakfast was grateful for the layer of dirt that she knew covered up her ragged appearance. Can't say anything negative about a hard-working woman.

"You left without saying anything yesterday," he said finally. He shoved his hands in his pockets and tried to maintain a pleasant expression, but Rey could sense his heavy concern and tried her best to hold back an exasperated sigh. She was still getting used to people. People who cared about her, who felt the need to comment about her because they cared. People who were interested in her personal business because they wanted to see her content and happy. As much as the idea of it thrilled her, she knew she'd be lying if the reality of it wasn't a bit annoying. She wished, perhaps selfishly, that they didn't care so much, that they could just leave her to her own devices sometimes to let her deal with whatever she might be dealing with alone. 'We don't leave our friends hanging', Poe's words to a group of pilots echoed in her head. She remembered how he turned to wink at her in passing that day. She loved having friends- truly loved it, honestly- but sometimes…

"I'm sorry," she said suddenly, glancing up at him with a wry smile before turning back to her adjustments. "I just felt a bit dizzy after the sim and…"

"Was it because I mentioned the crash? Rey, I'm—"

"No," she interrupted, dropping her arm. "It's nothing to apologize for, Finn."

He frowned. "But it wasn't my story to tell. It was yours. I'm sorry."

Rey turned the wrench over in her hand before nodding and looking up kindly. "Thanks."

He gave a solemn nod in return. "Poe's said…" he took in a deep breath and shuffled his feet. "He said you've been having some trouble sleeping. I didn't mean to remind you of what happened with all that and everything."

Finn sighed and brushed his hand over his hair and looked anywhere that wasn't Rey. She could feel the embarrassment and regret at possibly hurting her roll off of him and it touched her. She laughed slightly.

"Oh, it's not that," she said, rising to her feet and putting her tool down. She smiled at him. "I'm used to it. The nightmares," she continued. Finn looked at her, his features studiously set,
determined to listen.

"I've had them for years. They actually went away for a bit while we were stranded out there," she said, motioning to some unseen place, "But they seem to have come back with a vengeance. Making up for lost time, I assume," she said with a slight chuckle.

Finn arched a brow at her reaction. Maybe her lack of sleep was getting to be too much, he wondered. Laughter wasn't something he was expecting.

"Ok," he said finally. He lifted his hands towards her and she looked over as one of them moved to rest on her shoulder before looking up at him a bit awkwardly. "So you need to sleep, right?"

Rey nodded.

Finn squinted briefly in thought before his eyes seemed to drift off. There was silence for a moment.

"Sometimes, when I couldn't sleep, it was because I was worried about something. You know?"

Rey tilted her head and looked up at him. He blinked, trying to organize his thoughts to explain.

"You know...sometimes when things wouldn't go right during training, or...or if one of the guys had said something stupid to me. If it bothers you, sometimes it stops you from sleeping."

Rey frowned and pulled her head back a bit. "Really?"

Finn nodded.

"And I mean...it didn't happen very often," he continued, "but sometimes if I was feeling guilty about something...those times were the worst. I'd toss and turn. I wouldn't feel better about it until I fixed it," he said, clearing his throat a bit. "Whatever it was."

Rey grinned at him with a scrunch of her nose, but something anxiously tugged at the back of her mind.

"I'm not very good at advice," he admitted finally, giving her a sheepish grin. "but sometimes when I couldn't sleep and I had no idea why...."

_He's so desperate to help_, Rey mused. She encouraged him on with a sympathetic smile.

"Sometimes I used to sneak out of the barracks. I knew of this place," he said with a touch of wonder in his eyes as he looked at her. "It had a large viewport but never had anyone in it. It was like this little pocket of the ship that no one ever managed to reach. And from there I used to just stare out into space, out at the stars...when we were passing through a system, you could see the big curve of the galaxy. It was beautiful."

Rey listened and found herself hanging on his every word. Occasionally she used to look up at the sky in Jakku- moreso when she was younger than when she got older. When she got older it just became too painful. She didn't want to watch anymore. She couldn't.

"You looked at the stars?" she asked. He nodded.

"Yep," he said softly. "And I'd think...that maybe out there, somewhere, my parents were there. I know I had parents. We weren't clones, like the Empire used. Somewhere I had a mother, and a father."
Rey blinked back in surprise. She knew these feelings, and hearing them from Finn's mouth hit so hard that she had to resist the urge to step back and away from him.

"And I used to think that, wherever they were, that maybe they were looking out at space, too. That we were looking out at space together."

Rey's resolve was failing against the onslaught of old feelings and she tried her best to blink back tears. This was too much. Her mind was already a mess. Bitterly she wondered why he was telling her this when she looked up and found him looking softly back at her.

"I know you probably hate it outside after being stuck out there, but maybe you should go, just for a little bit, and get some fresh air tonight," he said helpfully.

Rey frowned. Is this what he was getting at? Couldn't he have said it without the story pulling her further into the painful confusion she was already in?

"Hey," he said again, and he brought up a hand to brush against her face. She flinched away slightly on reflex, and he pulled his hand back.

"Sorry," she said. She didn't want to look at his face to see the hurt that was undoubtedly there. He was her friend. She just…

"I used to do the same," she admitted. "When I was small. I would sit outside and stare into space hoping I'd see their ship coming back for me."

Finn's eyes grew wide.

"I gave up as I got older. I mean I didn't 'give up' give up," she clarified with a toss of her head, "I just…stopped. It was pointless. I don't put myself through that anymore. Besides, I know now they're—"

"Hey, Finn!" came a shout from across the room. Rey leaned to peer over her friend's shoulder to see Poe grinning and waving them over. "Sim's all ready! For both of you, if you want!" he said with a nod.

Finn let his hand fall from her shoulder and looked over briefly before looking back at Rey, his face a picture of seriousness.

"Rey….I don't really understand what's going on, but if you want someone to talk to about it….you know you can always come to me. Any time."

Rey looked up into his eyes and did her best to squeeze out a smile. "Thank you," she said with a nod.

"Do you want to come critique me on my sim? I could use the help," he said with a grin. Rey shook her head, trying and failing to match his enthused expression.

"Maybe next time, Finn."

He turned his head to the side, trying to convince her to reconsider with a series of silly expressions that begged her to say yes. She laughed and rolled her eyes.

"Ok, definitely next time."

He gave her one more look before she patted him on the arm. "Next time," she repeated with a
"Where are you off to then?" he asked.

She paused and turned to look at him over her shoulder. "Going to try and get some rest," she said. He nodded and gave a short wave as she left out the hanger access doors.

—

Major Caluan Ematt sat across his desk from his General as she looked down at her hands, fingers laced together. She fumbled with them in agitation.

"General..." he began softly. She sighed and tossed her head in annoyance.

"Oh, is this really necessary?" she huffed. Ematt cocked a brow at her and she huffed again.

"If we're to try your son fairly, we need to have the complete picture. It would help immensely if we knew how he fell to the Dark Side to begin with," he reasoned.

"Are you sure he's even my son anymore?" she scoffed.

"You certainly seem to be," he replied back.

She gave him a look and visibly deflated. "Yes," she said quietly. "I know he's my son..."

She sat back against the cushioned seat and played absently with a few loose threads protruding from the armrest, no doubt damaged from move after move as the Resistance constantly shifted locations.

"I don't know what to tell you," she began, glancing up at him. "I thought..."

She pursed her lips and sighed. "When he was small, I could tell that there was something, some undefinable thing lurking. After doing some investigating with my brother, we discovered it was a being called Snoke. There was no record of him anywhere, but since Luke was investigating the origins of the Jedi, apparently he had run across his name in some old data store."

She turned to look at the only piece of decoration adorning the bare office wall.

"The only catch was that the data store was old. Impossibly old, " she emphasized, looking back at the Major. He nodded.

"So there might be some truth to what Kylo Ren said?" he tried to propose delicately, but Leia winced none the less.

"He showed me things...my son." Leia's eyes lost focus as she fell into the memory of the day before. "I thought I was doing enough to keep Snoke at bay, but apparently.....apparently..."

Leia's shoulders slumped forward and she covered her face with her hands. "Oh god, Caluan, he was so scared. He was so, so scared. What have I done?"

She sobbed and he tried to reach across his desk towards her but she was too far away.

"Leia, listen to me. You tried. You couldn't have know the extent to which your son had that thing in his mind. You couldn't have known."

"Couldn't I?" she said suddenly, looking up. Her eyes were red and her cheeks shining. "Couldn't I
have just stopped for two seconds to ask him what the hell he meant when he said he 'wasn't allowed' to sleep at night?"

The anger rose in her voice and her hands moved to grip the seat tightly. Ematt closed his eyes and held up a hand before looking at her again.

"Alright," he said firmly.

Leia sniffed and tried to relax, leaning back against the chair.

"So we've established that…that perhaps more could have been done. But given the rebuilding of the Senate and other affairs, you certainly had a lot on your plate."

"And my son," she said bitterly, "should have come first."

Ematt's lips pressed into a thin line as he looked at his General warily. "Perhaps. But there's no changing the past. There is only what we can do now, and for the future," he said, leaning back into his seat.

"So how shall we approach this, General? What will become of Kylo Ren?"

Leia looked up at him sadly, almost wishing he would propose some plan of action himself so that, for once, she wouldn't have to be the one to do it. But she knew she couldn't skirt this responsibility. Not again.

She blinked and shook her head helplessly.

"For once, I don't know….I just don't know."

_God I wish Han were here._

Rey fumbled with the print scanner to get into her quarters and dragged her feet as she stumbled into her room and collapsed onto the bed.

_Ohh, it's so comfortable_, she mused, and her hands gripped the sheets as she rubbed her filthy face into them. When she finally pushed herself up with a sigh she was greeted with a weird, grease-stained smudging of her face on the fabric. Rey blinked down at it, almost unable to process what she was looking at, until she remembered she was still covered with engine grime and she let out a whimper.

Dragging herself back to her aching feet, she stripped down and climbed into the fresher. Her mind was on autopilot as she got herself clean. Although the use of so much water still managed to bother her some, she knew that now that she had experienced having the use of a fresher regularly that she'd have a very hard time going back.

"You'll never have to worry about that again," Leia said. "We'll take care of you, Rey."

She sighed as the water washed over her and turned up the temperature. The heat was penetrating, steaming up the small room almost instantly, and Rey rested her head against the wall while her fingers absently drew abstract shapes against the glass.

As she stepped out and began to towel herself off, she felt that Poe's advice of working herself into
blissful exhaustion was a good one. Going back into her room, she looked down at her ruined sheets and scratched at the splotch her face had made with a sigh. She could sleep around it, she knew, but as her eyes wandered downward, she spotted something black spilling from her trouser pocket and her hand clutched tightly to her towel.

Ah yes, the nightmares.

Rey was on the verge of tears. Was she tired enough to avoid them? Finn's words came to her again- his first ones, not the ones that made her stomach twist at the thought of her parents who could never come back for her- and she reluctantly scooped it up into her hand.

Guilt.

Guilty.

She'd not heard anything about Kylo, not really, since her meeting with the General. There had been a preliminary hearing. Rumors swirled that something had happened, something significant enough to have left Rey a writhing, pained mess on the floor that day, but what exactly no one would dare say. Something about sanctions and reprimands.

She didn't like to think that Finn was right. She was sure she only carried this for comfort- as in, coping with the crash, surviving it, nearly thirsting to death, and then navigating a foreign planet with the dangerous and murderous leader of the Knights of Ren. Not because she felt guilty that they'd hauled him off. That he didn't even run. That maybe she actually missed—

She stopped that line of thought immediately, but already images paraded themselves inside her desperately strained mind of this same texture hard beneath her fingertips, the unyielding warmth of the mass of him that he pressed her closely to…she shuddered.

She didn't feel guilty. He saved her, yes, but he also put her into those situations. She didn't owe him anything. But she still somehow felt guilty.

She felt guilty.

Although Finn would be horrified to hear that his advice was going in this direction, clutching the cowl she knew what she had to do.

Unceremoniously dropping her towel to the floor, and with a look of determination, she hastily wrenched open a drawer and yanked a fresh set of clothing onto her still damp body, combing out her dripping hair with her fingers and, pulling energy from somewhere, tugged on her boots, and left her quarters.

It took some navigating until the natural texture of the base walls gave way to stark metal reminiscent of a starship. People she passed in the corridor gave her suspicious glances but she was too tired to care. She knew she looked a mess. Everyone had pretty much said so. What was a little more? When she reached an out-of-the-way reinforced portal, it was then she knew she had reached the right place. She waved her hand over the door access and stepped inside, the door closing again behind her with a gentle hiss.

"What are you doing here?" a man said down the hall. His hand fell automatically on his blaster grip.

Rey swallowed hard, suddenly not entirely convinced of what she was doing, but lifted her chin with authority. "I'm here to see the prisoner."
The prisoner. Should she have specified? Were there others imprisoned here? Other First Order members that maybe he knew?

"No one is allowed in, General's orders."

Rey's lips pressed together into a thin line. It couldn't end this easily but at the same time she refused to go to Leia for permission. This was her decision, and she was going to take care of it.

Suddenly there was a scratching at a nearby door followed by a series of bangs that startled her out of her lack of confidence. One of the guards cussed quietly under his breath and nodded to his companion who picked up a commlink.

There was more banging, and instinctively Rey stepped forward out of curiosity to see what it was.

"REY?" came a muffled shout. Her breath hitched in her throat.

"REY!" he screamed, and beat and pounded at the door. He had felt her the moment she stepped into the cell block. She was so close, and he clawed into the minds of those pawns supposedly guarding him- he could sense they weren't going to let her see him and he was furious.

He stepped back from the door, pulled back his fist, and slammed it into the metal, causing it to bulge.

Rey jumped at the impact.

The guard was beside himself, the adrenaline rushing through him out of sheer terror causing his fingers to fumble the safety of his gun as he tried to raise it and prepare for what he felt was an inevitable jail break.

Rey stepped past him straight for the door, and through the small window inside, she saw Kylo's face desperately fill it and their eyes met for the first time in days. There was a tug at the back of her head, and she saw his fingertips brush against the edges of the glass.

Something steady filled her and, turning, she reached and put her hand firmly on the guard's still shaking weapon, pushing the muzzle towards the floor.

"Stop this and let me inside," she commanded.

He shook his head vehemently. "No one goes in without the General! She's the only one with the ability to stop him when he gets like this."

"Why? Because she has the Force?"

The guard eyed her warily despite the panic still coursing through him, but he reluctantly nodded.

"Do you know who I am?"

Rey felt weird 'pulling rank' like this, but she couldn't think of anything else to do. If having the Force was her ticket inside, she knew it was worth trying.

"Y-You're that scavenger girl. The one studying under Luke Skywalker."

A muffled growl came from behind the door and Rey snapped her head to see Kylo's furious eyes locked onto the guard from the other side of the glass. Rey raised her hand, getting his attention, and pleaded with him with her eyes. Kylo looked between the both of them for a moment before pushing himself away from the door and taking a couple of steps back. Rey nodded and turned her
attentions back to the terrified guard. He couldn't seem to take his eyes off of the feral man on the other side of the door and Rey pressed down firmly again on his weapon.

"Yes. Studying under Luke Skywalker. Because I…I also have the Force."

She watched as the guard's thoughts clicked into place and his eyes immediately darted to the old weapon hooked at her side. He and the guard by the cellblock entrance stared at her, and she resisted the urge to just compel him to open the door (maybe that would prove it) when slowly, she looked down and saw as a small space began to force its way open from the bottom. Kylo was already several steps ahead of her. The guard fumbled for his gun again.

"Let me in, or he'll let me in for you and you'll lose a door in the process," she said calmly. "It's your choice."

The guard winced, frowned, and slumped briefly as if he were regretting his entire day. When Rey brushed against the edges of the man's mind, she discovered that indeed he was.

Cautiously he approached the small window into the room and tapped the muzzle of his gun against it.

"Hey!" he bellowed, and the creaking of the door ceased. "Listen up, Kylo Ren!"

Suddenly his face was back in the portal and his eyes looked about ready to devour the poor man alive.

"Step back against the wall without moving and I will open this door. When the door closes again, you may move from the wall," he instructed loudly. "Any deviation from this will result in your immediate termination, is that clear?"

All of them in the hall heard a loud scoff.

"Is that clear?" he shouted again.

There was a fresh bang against the door, maybe another punch against it, when a loud "YES" was shouted back. When the guard looked through the window again, Kylo was pressed against the far wall, glaring at him.

"Open it!" Kylo screamed, his hands balled into fists against the metal, and the guard looked away and glanced skeptically at Rey.

"Are you sure you want to go in there?" he asked. Rey sighed and nodded.

"Yes."

The guard motioned to his companion and, slowly, the battered door opened. Rey moved forward until an arm shot in front of her, stopping her cold.

"Your weapon, miss."

"What?"

"I can't let you go in armed. Too dangerous."

Rey considered the man, but, taking a deep breath, she unhooked her saber and handed it over. When she turned towards the door, she saw Kylo straining against the wall he'd pushed himself against, eyes burning into her, and, she stepped inside.
"What's going on down there?"

Leia stepped into the control room and towards a monitor that had way too many people huddled around it.

"General!" one of them exclaimed, giving her a salute that she waved away. It was too late in the evening for that.

"Status of the prisoner," she ordered.

"It seems the scave—, er, Rey, has pushed her way into Kylo Ren's cell," the man reported.

" 'Pushed her way in?' What does <i>that</i> mean?" she said exasperated, and a space was cleared for her at the monitor.

Through the slightly grainy image, she could see Rey stand by the door as it closed and her son moving slowly away from the opposite wall. Were those tears in her eyes? The room was silent as they watched the two on the screen silently take each other in, barely moving. His mouth was slightly open as he gaped at her, eyes wide, and Leia found herself furrowing her brow. <i>What in the world….</i>

Rey was overcome as she looked at him and couldn't help the tears that fell from her eyes. She couldn't make sense of her reaction. She was so tired. <i>Please let this be the right thing to do…</i>

He stared at her and she frowned. When she tried to push stealthily against his mind she felt the edges of him easily evade her and she came up with nothing.

"How…how have you been?" she tried, almost wincing at the casualness of the question.

"Fine," he replied quickly, still staring at her in a daze.

"Ok."

Rey nodded absently and sucked briefly at her top lip. She scratched nervously at her arm when her eyes caught sight of his hands.

"What…" she began, pointing. "What happened?" she asked quietly, and slowly she took a step towards him. His eyes never left her as he mirrored her approach and took a step of his own.

"It's nothing," he replied, his brow twitching slightly.

They stood before each other in the center of the cell now, Rey staring down at his hands and Kylo down at her. Hesitantly she took one of his cuffed hands and raised it up to inspect the damage.

"Have you split the knuckle? What have you been doing?" she scolded.

"Punching things," he said frankly.

Rey blinked and looked up at him with a glare and a small smirk tried to tug at the corner of his mouth. Looking down again, she tentatively brushed a thumb over the battered skin and sighed.

"I'll see if I can't find where they put our supplies. Maybe that salve—"

"Forget about it."
"Why?"

His expression softened. Her eyes searched his, nervously darting over the face where her mark ran across it in one long sweep and sadness overcame her. She looked at the cuffs around his wrists and ran her fingers over them.

"Why?" she asked again, knowing this time the question asked something else. He merely tilted his head at her.

"Why let them cuff you?" she continued. "Couldn't you just…" Rey shook her head and looked up at him, pleading. "Just get out of them and leave? I know you can."

Kylo gave a small laugh and dropped his hands, pulling away from her. "And how do you think that would end, Rey?"

She sighed in frustration and hung her head. She hated this. She knew he deserved to be locked up for what he'd done. She also knew that if he tried to escape now it would be a bloodbath. He clearly knew it, too.

She watched as he took a step closer and raised his hands to push her chin up to face him.

"And where would I go? Hmm?" he asked softly, his frown deepening. "Tell me."

He needed to make her understand but still she shook her head at him. "I have nothing, Rey."

She felt the tears prick at her again, and again she grabbed at the cuffs and saw, when she moved them, the angry red marks on his skin where they had rubbed at him for days. He felt her repeat her previous questions in her mind as she tugged and he sighed.

Leia watched in almost morbid fascination as her angry, vicious, violent, murderous son stood there docile, practically at the young woman's feet. The tension in the room was more than palpable. At some point she had pushed herself to the edge of her chair, and as she watched Rey question his motives, a strange and dangerous idea inched its way across her mind. Discretely, Leia lifted her hand and, eyes locked on the monitor, moved her fingers almost imperceptibly.

The cuffs clicked and clattered loudly to the floor.

Gasps escaped from both of them. In shock, they stared frozen at the discarded manacles.

*He did it.*

*She did it.*

They looked up at each other, both in trepidation and concern when, slowly, he kicked the cuffs aside and stepped closer. Rey's eyes grew wide and she was unable to look away when his arm finally lifted and came up around her waist, pulling her into him. Rey felt him sigh deeply as a strange static prickled at her skin from the sudden contact and she gasped against his shoulder, her hand finding its way to his chest and gripping tightly to his shirt. Her eyes fell closed as his other arm wrapped across her back and suddenly her mind felt lighter, calmer, and she let herself chase the feeling after days of her mind in revolt and she leaned into him.

He held onto her tightly, careful not grip her too harshly, but couldn't help himself when he buried his face in her hair. It was damp across his face and smelled like the community fresher's all purpose soap, but as he tucked himself close to the nape of her neck, there was something familiar there and it took all his self-control not to smother her and figure out just what exactly it was.
He felt her fingers dig into him and her forehead press against his neck.

"You know what I actually wish right now?" she whispered. He pulled back slightly, brushing his mouth against her ear.

"What?"

Rey's grip slackened and he felt her relax in his arms.

"I wish…that we were back there…" she began, half disbelieving the words coming out of her mouth, but her mind was so overwhelmed she couldn't stop. "…back in the wastes."

Rey pressed her eyes tightly closed and felt his arms adjusted around her to pull her tighter against him and he took in a deep, steady breath.

Rey, Rey…

Taking a moment to steady himself, he reluctantly pulled an arm away while still holding her close and groped behind himself to reach towards his cot. Grabbing at his one and only blanket, he yanked it from the bed and shook it out with one hard flick. Rey shifted to watch with curiosity and when she looked up at him, he merely gave her a small smile. Gripping her firmly around the waist, he started to sink to the floor, pulling her down with him. She let him guide her down as he gave the blanket one more shake and settled it around them.

If the staff in the control room were in a mild state of panic over Kylo Ren going free of his restraints, their jaws were definitely now on the floor as they stared at the prisoner and the supposed Jedi huddled under a blanket on the prison cell floor. They waited, utterly enthralled, for something else to happen and were shocked again when nothing did. The longer they watched, the longer the two of them just laid there…sleeping?

Slowly activity began to resume and Leia felt as their feelings almost unanimously shifted from fear to confusion and back again. Looking back at the monitor, she watched as Rey seemed almost practiced at tucking in close beneath her son's chin, and his fingertips brushing her shoulder had a sense of familiarity about them.

It occurred to her suddenly that this is what it must've been like. This is how they survived their nights lost in the wilderness of the planet outside. It looked so familiar because it was familiar.

Leia felt a slow trickle of mixed emotions seep into her veins and her hand pulled absently at her mouth in contemplation.

"Listen carefully," she said sternly, turning to the stunned staff around her. "I'm granting Rey full and unfettered access to the prisoner, and no one, NO ONE, is to breathe a word of whatever transpires in the prison block, is that understood? You are now hereby all sworn to the highest secrecy. Anyone found breaching this order will suffer punishment to the fullest extent. Is that understood?"

Their shocked expressions froze on her but soon a disjointed chorus of assent soon followed.

"Yes, Ma'am!"

Chapter End Notes
WELL THEN. I tried doing more proofreading/revising tonight, but my eyes started to glaze over and soon I just wanted to cuddle up with Rey and Kylo under that damn threadbare blanket so I hope it doesn't seem awful in places. *sigh* I can't even do my own story justice, haha. What a mess.

In other news, we've had more INCREDIBLE FAN ART from you wonderful people!! Courtesy of Officer Icey themself! Rey sharing Kylo's cowl: http://these-are-the-first-steps.tumblr.com/post/144144601821/poor-queequeg-nightsick-in

THANK YOU ICEY!!! Love to all you guys who spare a bit of your talent on this. I just don't have the words to adequately express. ;-;

There have been so, so many of you who commented last two chapters- THANK YOU!! Thank you for waiting, and thank you for reading The_Dark_Becomes_You, Starships, dalia_11, g_girl143, Karla, Neoikeia, chai, Ellensama, blueenvelopes935, PoorQueequeg, sarena, Frau+Blucher, asfiksija, Just A Human, Anna, La_Catrina, Nina10, ViolatheForceWhisperer, All_The_Feels, Alania, Jinga, Allison, Eroica, mweerden, Reylobase, nareno, Huy, CharlotteCAgain, Raxephan, ivylovesnarry, Nuxyobluda, Killertopaz96, iceybae, Chakashi, Jayra177, GotMyInvite, Patty, and 13oct.

The response on the last real chapter was just massive, and while I can't hope to get the same again, I just want to thank all of you for your patience and love while I got stuff sorted. Thanks so much for everything guys, and let me just say, it is a very, very slippery slope from here, so buckle up....
Chapter Notes

Dedicated to the anon on tumblr who said they read this story to help with moments of panic attacks. Stay strong, anon. This one's for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey sat in the back corner of the canteen carefully nursing a hot cup of caf, a good splash of cream lightening the dark liquid.

Rey felt his arms curled around her when she awoke, and when she made to roll away felt them tense and pull her tightly against him again.

"In a hurry?" said his decidedly sleep-rough voice into her hair.

"Is that your go-to line whenever you wake up with someone in your arms?"

She felt his chest tremor beneath her hand with a low laugh.

"No."

She closed her eyes for several seconds, recalling those last few moments before she had left his cell. She saw how he had tried to be nonchalant about her leaving, casually leaning against the wall and toying with the frame of his sole piece of furniture as she tried uselessly to straighten out her rumpled clothes, until she had knocked on the door and suddenly his hands were on her shoulders pulling her back around and into his chest.

"Say you'll come back...." he whispered against her ear.

"I..."

"Rey....please...."

He was begging.

"Somehow the nightmares stay away when you're near."

She gasped and struggled to look up at him. "Do you—?"

The door had finished opening and a new pair of guards stood on the other side looking strangely at them. Rey tried to care but couldn't do it, her mind too distracted by his confession.

She raised her hand to his neck. "I'll be back," she whispered so only he could hear, and pushed away, turned, and walked through the cell door as it began to close again without looking back.

Rey sighed and opened her eyes again.

She would be back.

"There you are," said a familiar voice, and Rey looked up just in time to see Poe, ever the early
bird, set down his tray next to hers. She smiled up at him.

"You're looking better. Finally get some rest?" he said with a grin.

Rey's eyes widened slightly and she gave a small, controlled smile, praying that nothing telling showed on her face.

"I did, actually," she said carefully looking down at her quickly cooling drink. She caught a few microscopic crumbs left over on her breakfast plate and scraped them off her finger with her teeth.

"Did ah…" he began, looking around a little nervously. "Did anything we said help at all? Finn told me you talked to him, too."

Rey continued to be engrossed with picking up crumbs until Poe ducked down to catch her eye. She blinked, sitting a bit straighter.

"We're worried about you, Rey," he admitted a little warily.

Rey sighed, deflated some, and gave him a kind smile. "Don't worry about me, Poe. I'll be fine."

Clenching his jaw a little sternly, he nodded in acknowledgement. He knew Rey could take care of herself, but that didn't stop him and everybody else from worrying about her.

"And it did help," she continued. She reached out and placed her hand over his. "Thank you for caring about me, Poe. I don't know what I'd do without you and Finn."

Poe softened at that and gave her a charming smile. "Flattery will get you everywhere, honey."

Rey scrunched up her nose with a laugh before giving his hand a pat, collecting her dishes, and leaving the canteen. Poe watched her with a concerned but kind expression as he slightly shook his head. Turning back, he gave a bit of a huff and dived into his breakfast.

—

Kylo stayed precisely where Rey had left him. He had spent what felt like several minutes staring at the door, the door she left through, and stood there as he felt her force signature move farther and farther away.

They didn't take her. For some reason that he found himself not wanting to think too hard about, she hadn't been arrested for pushing her way into his cell.

Before he'd fallen asleep with the feel of her skin beneath his fingertips, he had run through scenarios of what he would do if they stormed the cell and tried to take her from him. None of them ended well. All of them had Rey fairly annoyed with him.

But they hadn't come, and as he felt her move through the passageways of the base, the Force surrounding her was even and undisturbed. Peaceful. And eventually he sat down where he was, folded his legs, and did something he hadn't done in ages- meditated.

When the door to his cell opened again he was told he was getting time in the fresher and the pattern was almost exactly the same- small room, cuffs off, 60 seconds, cuffs on, shower, change, cell.

They took the cuffs off again when he came back. It seems they decided they were futile.

The next visitor to come had been a complete surprise, but the second he felt her draw near, he was
on his feet and standing in the middle of the room. Clenching and un-clenching his fingers, he was determined to be ready for her this time.

"Hello," Leia said simply once the door closed behind her.

Kylo said nothing. He watched blankly as her eyes passed over him and hovered briefly on his unruly hair before looking him in the eye again with a slight smile. He barely, almost imperceptibly, frowned.

"I'm here to let you know that I'll be escorting you to the next council meeting tomorrow," she announced.

He was silent but felt his blood pressure spike at the thought of sitting through another one of those trial sessions. It was pointless, and a part of him was irritated she didn't realize that, too.

She arched a brow at him and frowned. "You'll also be meeting your court-appointed defense this evening," she said with a bit more edge to her voice.

Kylo reared back. "I don't want a defense," he finally responded flatly.

Leia huffed and pursed her lips. "Ben—"

He hissed like he'd been burned and went to take a step back until the woman raised her hands and closed her eyes. "Kylo," she corrected.

Kylo's lip twitched and he felt his hands form into their customary fists. How dare she call him that again and rile him up- especially after Rey had been such a successful balm to his nerves. She was ruining everything. Just as she always does.

"I'm sorry…." she said softly.

His eyes widened slightly as he tilted his head to the side. "You're what?" he bit back.

She didn't reply.

"Did you really just try to apologize to me?" he said with narrowed eyes, and he watched with bittersweet satisfaction as she flinched at his rough tone.

Leia took a deep breath. "I'm just here to let you know—"

"I do not, he enunciated through gritted teeth, "want a defense."

Leia's eyes snapped straight to her son's and her look veritably blazed into him. "Is that what you're going to tell Rey?" she said with a pointed grin. "That you just rolled over and let them do what they wanted with you?"

Kylo's face contorted at the sound of her name and he shifted back slightly as his mother edged forward with a rather predatory gleam in her eye.

"You saw," he said breathily, more statement than question.

Leia gave an exaggerated nod, her brows raised high. "Some girl, forcing her way into the prison block, to see you? Of course I was notified."

Kylo took an unsteady breath as his eyes darted around his cell. They fell, finally, on a small black window screwed into the very top of the wall. He quickly looked back to the diminutive
woman still standing tersely before him.

"Why?" he asked, taking a step back. He felt the balance in the room shifting to Leia's favor and he hated it.

Leia gave her head a small, confused shake. "Why what, Ben? You're going to have to use your words here."

He took in a seething breath through his teeth and pointed an accusatory finger at the dense woman.

"Call me that again," he warned, "and I will throw you out. I don't care what you have hidden in here."

She gave an exasperated sigh.

"Why did you let her stay if you knew?" he gritted out finally. Why haven't you done anything to her?

Leia squinted at her petulant only child. "And what good would that do?" she half sneered. "Rey's clearly the only person who can get through to you, 'Kylo'."

"Don't say it like that…" he murmured, but Leia would not be stopped.

"—and I have no problem with letting her in to see you if that's what it takes."

Kylo cocked his jaw to the side. "Well that's different. I seem to recall you swearing otherwise when I arrived," he reminded her, narrowing his eyes.

"Well that's before I figured out the reason why," she said simply.

He pressed his lips together. Don't say it…. he pleaded where she couldn't hear, and they stared at each other in strained silence.

Leia never broke his gaze. "Your defense should arrive some time after dinner," she said finally. Kylo went to open his mouth but she raised her finger and leveled it at him. "And you will meet with them," she commanded, cutting him off.

The second his mouth clicked shut, she turned on her heel, knocked on the cell door, and left, leaving Kylo momentarily stunned to have just been treated like some unruly child who couldn't decide for himself. Turning around, he lifted up his arm and slammed a fist into the metal wall, denting it, the shock pulsing through his bones.

He sighed and flexed his hand before slumping down onto the cot. Looking down at his knuckles, he inwardly cursed when he noticed one of the scabs had broken open and again started to bleed.

Rey's not going to like that, he found himself thinking, and he blinked, shaking the thought from his head.

Looking up, his eyes found the black window and could see, very faintly, a small, flashing red light. He scowled at it, cradled his hand to his chest, and let the meager comfort the cot offered him take him as he fell back with a scowl.

—

Rey paced the halls of the base aimlessly, a hand in her pocket thoughtlessly fingering the black
swath of fabric she had completely forgotten about within. She had nowhere to be, no real obligations. She figured she should probably train. But she in her entirety exuded such calm that her mind was completely mellow and she was enjoying the sensation. Why shouldn't she revel in it a bit?

Occasionally she reminded herself who the garment in her pocket belonged to, and it kicked off a chain reaction of thoughts. The cowl. Kylo. Broken and battered flesh. The salve.

This is how she found herself eventually in front of the door to Inventory.

Taking a timid step in, she found a neatly kept woman working away on several holopads at her desk.

"Um…excuse me," Rey began. The woman didn't answer. "Excuse me?" she tried again.

The woman's head snapped up to Rey. "Eta Stalass, Eta, says it right here on my name tag," she said in a veritable flurry as she fingered her badge. "What," she said with a bit of edge as she gave Rey a once-over over her glasses, "can I possibly do for you?"

Rey was momentarily taken aback, but pushed forward. "Well, ah, Eta, my name is Rey. I arrive a few days ago."

The woman's eyes perked up. "Ahh yes, Rey of Jakku, correct?" she said, quickly picking up a particular holopad from the pile (they all looked the same) and began tapping away. "Few possessions to speak of brought onto base," the woman began to list, looking down her narrow nose. "Suite 47A, is that correct?"

Rey's brow twitched slightly at the apparent assessment, especially the remark about her belongings. What few things she had were still on Ahch-to, but that didn't mean it had to be rubbed in her face. Feeling a bit of heat rise up the back of her neck, she arched a brow and forced a smile onto her face.

"Yes, that is correct. However, I did come with a canvass sack. Any idea where that might be?"

Eta's brows rose and she began shaking her head as she flipped through her pad.

"Tan, filthy, full of cooking supplies and other odds and ends…" Rey continued. Would they have kept everything inside? It was worth a shot and she shrugged. "A helmet?" she concluded, and leaned herself forward enough to rest against the edge of Eta's desk. She noticed the woman's eyes shift in irritation at the trespass.

"Well, Miss Rey," she began, tugging her desk towards herself with a loud jerk and causing Rey to stumble slightly off balance from the loss of support. "It does not seem to have been an item attributed to you but to the prisoner Kylo Ren. It says he was carrying the sack when he was brought in."

Rey resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Yes, he was carrying it," she replied a little testily. "But the possessions were mine, I assure you."

In truth they were both of theirs. Even if Kylo had secured them in the end, it was Rey who technically found them.

Eta gave a slight hum as she tapped away. "Well," she said with a sigh, "prisoners usually have rights to their possessions even while under incarceration, but considering your claim and that you came in together, I may be able to transfer the items to your name."
Rey straightened up, listening.

"However," the woman said with a hard upward glance at the girl looking down at her. "the helmet and..." she squinted briefly at the screen before straightening up again, "saber? They cannot be released."

Rey didn't want those things, although she figured Kylo might, but they weren't a priority right now. Still... "Why not?" she asked out of curiosity.

"Evidence," came the reply.

Rey frowned slightly. She considered for a moment asking what kind of evidence they could possibly constitute when her mind helpfully supplied a series of images of Kylo Ren striking down smugglers and pirates at Maz's, his boots stomping through Starkiller Base, the destruction of the Hosnian system....

"Fine," she said curtly, pressing her lips together and closing her eyes. Kylo...

The woman nodded and made a few additional taps. "I should be able to clear their transfer by the end of the day. Would that suit?"

Rey nodded. "Yes," she said simply, and when Eta put down her panel and became engrossed in several others, she took that as her cue to leave.

So much for peace...

As she wandered down the hall, he filled her thoughts again. How he had chased her, how he pulled her mind to his day after day until finally finding her and causing them to fall out of the sky like some fiery meteor from the bowls of Kahena...she covered her face with her hands as people brushed against her shoulder passing through the passageway.

She'd had sleep, and her mind was starting to clear now.

Why?

A tug at the back of her mind pulled in response and her eyes cracked open. He couldn't hear her thoughts, could he?

Rey heard herself whimper in exasperation and, bringing her hands down hard against the rough surface of the wall, she gritted her teeth and blazed a path straight to her quarters.

It was only mid afternoon, but when she arrived, she yanked the cowl out of her pocket and placed it roughly on a side table before flopping into her bed.

She sighed as she slid her eyes closed. This felt different somehow, like things were better now. Her bed felt welcoming, and suddenly a part of her was furious that she'd had to find solace in the arms of Kylo Ren after remembering all the things he'd done.

"Evidence."

Rey curled up into a ball. The worst part was the realization that, no matter what she'd seen from him, it was only a tiny fraction of what he'd actually done. Just a drop in the pond.

Although the Hosnian System had not been small at all...

Behind her eyelids she saw again the red beams streaking across the sky. How had she gotten to
this point? Curling her arms around herself, she wondered this repeatedly, while in the back of her mind she realized her grip on herself was lacking something. In fact, everything felt like it was lacking.

She bit lightly at her bottom lip, but as her body began to relax, so did her brow, and she slipped gently into sleep.

—

A feeling of foreboding came over him, but after working to figure out the source he realized for a change that it wasn't his own. Somehow, it was coming from her. He went to gently pull on the thing tying them together when there was a stiff knock on the metal door.

Kylo's appointed defense had arrived.

He was a gruff looking older man, half shaved, and looking like he'd never seen a good day. Gray generously peppered his scruffy beard and hair and the bags under his eyes seemed to say that exhaustion was the only thing he'd ever known.

Suddenly Kylo was wishing vehemently that this was a man he would never, ever turn into.

His defense had been graced with a chair, a luxury in Kylo's high security, no-frills cell, and he took it as Kylo himself sat on his cot, not bothering to stand up when he entered.

The man grunted. "...can't even bother with a goddamned table..." he mumbled, shuffling through some papers. Kylo arched a brow.

He finally seemed to come away victorious with a holopad that had been wedged inside a folder and pressed heavily on its side to activate it.

"I hate these new models," he complained gruffly. "You know how to activate this damn thing, kid?"

Kylo's brow twitched between annoyance and amusement. What did his mother even bring him?

"I'm—"

"I know who you are," the man cut him off, waving the pad around before smacking the edge of it with his palm. "Some damn fool youth who thought it'd be a good idea to join the bad guys only to find out you got in over your head. Seen it a million times...ah! There it goes..."

Kylo sat stunned, staring incredulously. 'Some damn fool youth' was probably the most creative and least edgy thing he'd ever been called in his life, and part of him wanted to throw back his head and laugh if he wasn't too busy being shocked from being addressed that way.

As the screen on the holopad flickered to life, he watched as the man mumbled a bit until he froze. Glancing at the back of his pad, Kylo knew it was his file he'd accessed. Only the old gods knew what the Resistance said about him...

The man gaped a bit before raising up his pad eye-level to Kylo and looked back and forth from what he could tell was his masked face to his unmasked one currently before him. Dressed in a heavy tank top and standard issue pants, he imagined he hardly fit the image he was accustomed to.

There was a shift in the man's demeanor and the haze he'd come in with seemed to lift immediately.
"My name is Kaelen Petrova. I am your court-appointed defense," the man said solemnly.

"I don't want a defense," Kylo automatically replied.

"So I've heard," he half scoffed. Glancing up at Kylo sitting rather boyishly with his arms pressed to his sides, eyes wide, and hands gripping the metal frame of his cot, Petrova eyed him warily before looking down again. "And I'm sorely tempted to comply with that request," he concluded.

Kylo's mouth twitched. "Then why don't you?"

The man snickered. "Because letting bias get in the way wouldn't be doing my job, and you are badly in need of a defense."

Kylo edged forward and pressed stealthily at the edges of Petrova's mind as he narrowed his eyes. "Is that why she sent you? Because she thought I wouldn't be able to dissuade you?"

"Who?" he said half exasperated. "Look, bitch and moan all you want, I'm here, and that's the end of it," he said sternly, tossing his pad back into a manila folder and shuffling again through several papers. He didn't notice at all when Kylo reared back.

Plucking one paper free, Petrova flipped it right side up and squinted. "Says here that they will most likely be gunning for the death sentence. No surprise there," he said casually, bringing the paper closer to his face.

"Let them."

"Are you nuts?"

Kylo didn't answer, but he felt the corner of his mouth jerk slightly up.

"Look here," Petrova began, letting his hand drop to his leg. "Nine times out of ten the death sentence is excessive and can be proven so. Granted, your track record is, well, massive, and it'll be a hard one to prove, but given what's written here about childhood trauma, I think we have a case."

So this is the angle. They're going to put my torment on display?

Kylo rose suddenly to his feet and began to pace the room. No, this is exactly what he didn't want. He ran both hands through his messy hair, ignoring his 'defense' who openly gaped at his height. He was bored by the reaction, but to Petrova's credit, he seemed to quickly recover. Slowly, the beginnings of a headache began to seep into Kylo's head.

"It says," the man began, "that you experienced extreme mental anguish from Snoke beginning at a young age, and because of that, it ultimately turned you against your family and—"

"Stop," Kylo snapped, rubbing at his temples. "Enough."

Petrova glared up at him. "You don't even want to hear what they have to say? This is all in your favor, by the way."

"No," he said quietly, distracted by the increasing pain in his head, and he grit his teeth. "Because it's wrong."

Petrova blinked a few times before scrutinizing the paper before him, and Kylo almost wanted to shout at him because he could feel the man thinking and between that and the pounding in his brain it was suddenly beyond grating.
"Well if it's wrong," he insisted. "We need to—"

"NO," he shouted this time. "You don't get it. The Supreme Leader," he began, and a sharp pain stabbed the side of his head and he hissed before it went away just as quickly again. Pulling his hand down, he curled his lip as he suddenly saw the man writing down something in the middle of his tirade. "...didn't turn me against my family. My 'family' did that well enough on their own," he spat.

Petrova raised his brows briefly in acknowledgement before giving his head a quick shake. "Well unless there's a family member willing to admit that for you, then—"

Kylo's brow twitched and he stomped over to him. His patience was gone. Grabbing Petrova's disorganized folder, he shoved it at him, and grabbed him by the arms.

"Hey, what're you—"

Kylo ignored his protests and hauled him over to the door where he did his best to knock without slamming a hand through it. His muscles strained as he gripped him, his sole goal to get him out without totally damaging him as his head throbbed fiercely, making it almost hard to see. Slowly, the door started to rise, and he jerked the man forward.

"You tell my mother," he seethed, giving his head a sharp shake in an attempt to focus through the pain, "that I don't want a defense and I don't want her pity."

Kylo took in a breath that sounded more like a hiss and the man stared up at him in mild shock until the door opened wide enough for Kylo to shove him over the threshold. He heard blasters activate in the hands of the guards but his focus was suddenly laser.

"Tell her it's too late for that," he charged.

Petrova gaped at him and confusion began to cloud his face. "But...who is...?" he started, shaking his head.

Kylo frowned. "What?" he asked, rearing back. "She didn't tell you?"

He didn't hold back this time. Despite the pain, or maybe even in spite of it, he let the the absurdity of it all bubble up and out of him with a hollow laugh as he glanced at the terrified guards and the stupid old man clutching his papers in front of him. He didn't seem so gruff now.

All the humor drained away as he leaned forward without passing through the doorway. "Princess Leia Organa," he recited bitterly, and gave the top of the door two bangs with the flat of his hand-'permission' to close. He grasped desperately for composure as he turned on his heel and didn't watch as Petrova's eyes widened and his face morphed into horror causing him to nearly drop and scatter his things to the floor.

Kylo clenched his jaw, sashayed back to his cot, spun around, and landed on it as if it were a throne, watching through squinted eyes as the door slid shut.

The show over, he took in a sharp breath.

*What is with this?* he wondered, squeezing his eyes shut. His head was killing him. Everything was killing him. This sort of pain wasn't exactly new to him, but that didn't mean he enjoyed it.

As he focused on trying to bottle up the pain, he thought idly that he had no real idea what he was doing with the trial and this defense thing or any of the rest of it. But in his entire life he had never
been in control of anything that happened to him, and so in his last acts, at least, he would hold and strangle that forbidden right with both hands. Even if it got him killed.

The dreams had been innocuous at first- superfluous shapes and colors, occasional faces. But then they had turned dark- incredibly dark.

Suddenly she was a child and she was screaming- voices coming from every direction to both threaten and soothe- and as she grew and grew they said they knew her and could harm her, or even better harm them. She didn't understand it at all until she looked down at her adolescent hands, stained crimson with blood, and a single familiar lightsaber glowing a light blue in her grasp.

*I killed them*, she felt herself think. *I killed them all*....

"Yes," a strong and familiar voice in her head now said- the same voice she had always heard, always known..."And now there is no one else who can save you."

When she looked up, she was knelt before an altar where a giant husk of a being sat enthroned before her. This...this was familiar. He leered forward on his seat, eyes burning into hers as her mind exploded in shattering agony. "You...belong...to me."

She felt herself open her mouth in a silent scream as the being laughed- a loud, papery sound that hurt as badly as the barbs it sliced through her very soul.

*I see you, little scavenger..." it purred in a sing-song voice. "I see you....tell me where he is."

Every atom of her being roared in protest as she somehow managed to bring her hands to the sides of her head.

"TELL ME!"

She screamed in earnest this time. She screamed so loud and so hard that her teeth knocked together as she tumbled off of her bed with a bang.

Rey's eyes opened immediately, her face still pressed to the floor, and her fingers clawed at the smooth surface as she squeezed her eyes shut and began to sob.

Every part of her was mortally terrified, and as she writhed on the floor and cried her mind kept wanting to replay the dream while the rest of her sought to run as far away from it as possible.

*What was that? WHAT WAS THAT?*

Everything had been so dark- impossibly so. And ancient. Its words rang through her mind- it saw her?

Her face red and probably bruised from the hard landing, Rey jerked herself upright and shakily looked around in terror.

It saw her. Nothing was safe. *Nothing* was safe.

Her eyes darted to her side table where the cowl had been angrily deposited, and she scurried quickly on her hands and knees to snatch it up before pulling herself to her feet.

A small part of her reasoned that she was headed back to the cell block because, logically, she told herself, he was the only one familiar enough with the Dark Side who could possibly even begin to
figure out what she'd just seen. The rest of her was on autopilot, mind blank, desperate to hold herself together as she stumbled through the corridors and passed thankfully few people at this late hour. Her head was throbbing— the pain from her dream wouldn't go away— and her vision swam from the pressure behind her eyes as she occasionally brought up the black fabric clutched in her hands to stifle a desperate sob.

No one stopped her when she walked up to the door, and she braced herself, panting, against its frame.

"Miss?" one of them asked. The guards were practically invisible to her. "Are you alright?"

She squeezed the metal as she turned her head to the side with a wince. "Please," she breathed. "Just open it."

Knowing their orders, they simply nodded with slight concern and did as she said. She stumbled into the dimly lit room where Kylo's head jerked towards her from his cot. He was immediately on his feet.

"Rey…" he breathed, and a smile almost came to his lips until he saw the splotches and shine all over her face. This was it. She couldn't hold back anymore, and her façade cracked open. He tilted his head with concern as he took a step closer.

"Rey?" he asked, moving to take her arms.

"Can't you feel it?" she strained. She took a step but faltered, her legs threatening to bring her to the ground, but his reflexes were faster and he grabbed her by the arms before she fell.

"Gods!" she cried, clutching at her head, and the flutter of black fabric between her fingers caught his eye.

Why does she have...

A muffled sob escaped from her, distracting him from his thoughts, and his face clouded over.

"Rey…Rey!" he called, but she merely gripped the sides of her head harder.

"Kylo…," she choked out. "I don't know what's happening…"

"What? What's happened?"

Rey merely shook her head as she squeezed her eyes shut and gulped for air.

"Rey…" he began in a warning tone. "Tell me what's going on or so help me—"

Suddenly Rey's hands came up to claw into his shirt and he could feel her nails scratch against his skin despite the thickness of the fabric.

"My head…Kylo, he sees me and I don't know what—"

"Who sees you? Who?" he demanded, and as her panic bled into him, he shook her slightly and her eyes lifted to meet his.

The look she gave him was exquisitely familiar. It was one he used to relish seeing on his interrogation subjects. One, he mused absently, he'd even hoped to see once on Rey. But looking at her now as she pulled at his shirt…
She bowed her head and pushed it into his chest, balling the fabric into her hands, and her breath came in short, shallow gasps. She was trying so hard to fight it.

Kylo scowled. This was ridiculous. But besides the desperation roiling off of her, suspicion began to churn in his gut and the sensation was sickening.

He made up his mind. Letting go only to take her head in his hands, he tipped back her face to look up at him. Her eyes were rimmed red and bloodshot. Looking into them, she didn't seem to see him at all, but saw through him. Taking in a shaky breath, he pressed against her mind and didn't just skirt the edges but dove straight in.

Rey's hands shot up to cover his, tugging at them weakly, and he hissed. "Shh, don't..." he pleaded, eyes closed. "Show me. Show me, Rey."

And she did. Images of her macabre dream flooded into him but he didn't have time to process it all as the floor beneath his feet seemed to tilt sideways. When he heard that voice, it fell away completely and he pulled back from her with a jerk, panting, his balance almost failing him.

"Snoke..." he whispered, breathing hard. He shook his head, a frown marring his face. "How?"

He blinked several times, trying to think, as he watched her bowed in front of him. Somewhere, closed off in the back of his mind, he still felt a dull throb from earlier in the day, and as he looked down at her...

The same...

When the realization hit him, he closed his eyes briefly and swallowed hard. He grabbed Rey by the shoulders and pushed her back in front of him.

"Rey, listen to me. Can you hear me?"

Her eyes darted in all direction and she shivered slightly, nodding, as his thoughts finally clicked into place.

"I need you to imagine a room. The safest, most secure room in the universe, alright?"

Tears silently streaked down her face.

"Did you hear me?" he asked, crooking a finger under her chin.

"Yes," she croaked out.

Kylo nodded and waited for only a moment. There was a reason that throbbing in his head from before was so familiar. He cursed under his breath at his complacency.

"Do you have it?" he snapped impatiently.

She nodded.

"A room that no one and nothing can ever get into?"

She nodded again.

"Alright," he said, taking in a deep breath. He pushed up her chin and her eyes met his.

"You need to surround the pain, Rey," he instructed. She frowned up at him and he shook his head.
"Find the edges of it," he insisted, "and surround it. You can do that, can't you?"

He watched as she blinked and he could feel as she probed here and there, trying to root the sensation out until finally her focus fell back onto him and he sighed.

"Ok," he said, moving to grip her shoulders. "Now take it all, and shove it into the room."

"But there's so much…" she began. He only squeezed her tighter.

"Rey, the longer it sits there, the deeper its roots will go. You have to rip it up, now, and lock it in there."

She whimpered and he could feel her lamenting over and over the extent of what she had to do. He knew it was too big. He knew it was purposefully excessive.

He's gone too far, doing this…He's gone too far. She's m—

Rey began to struggle in his grasp and he sucked in a breath.

"Rey," he warned. "Listen to me. Once you get it in that room and lock the door, the pain will go away."

That got her attention, and she looked up at him with the first shred of hope he'd seen all evening.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

He nodded. "Now do it."

He realized his teaching skills left a little to be desired but none the less he watched as she steadied herself, closed her eyes, and began to uproot the tendrils of pain that had taken hold.

"That's it…" he murmured. "None of it's real, Rey. Take it and lock it away…"

Bit by bit she worked, and sweat started to gather on her brow when the last of it proved to be the hardest. He watched as her face hardened, and with a huge mental shove, Rey pushed it away and locked the door shut.

Gasping, her eyes went wide, and her knees buckled from beneath her. She went down, dragging Kylo's arm with her, and his leg shot out to keep from toppling onto her. He went down to one knee as she crouched against the floor.

"It's gone," she said, gripping the arm she had trapped in her grasp. "It's completely gone."

He rolled back a bit to sit properly, bending his leg in as the other stretched in front of him nearly to the wall.

"I told you," he said simply.

They sat there in silence for awhile, her panting to catch her breath, while Kylo just stared at her, desperation eking to ask her a dozen questions but instead choosing to scowl at the space between them as his mind shot back and forth between screaming over his own incompetence at not noticing this sooner and daring to imagine how he could possibly begin to fix this situation.

She hunched over then, hiding her face, and Kylo felt her fingers dig into his flesh. Her back seemed to heave and odd little muffled noises started to come from her huddled form. When something splashed onto his skin and drip down his forearm, he knew.
His face softened, and, leaning forward, he used his trapped limb to firmly grasp her around the waist and with one motion he dragged her to him. When her back hit his chest, that same static from before prickled the hair on his skin and he heard her suck in a pained breath, and silently, she cried.

Kylo looked down at her bowed head and his face shifted subtly with his thoughts, his mind trying to cycle through everything. Her tears covered his arm as she wept in silence and, biting his lip, he tightened his grip, hesitating slightly before bringing up his other hand to lightly push back the hair away from her face. His eyes were wide and he swallowed hard when finally, with a gentle push, he brought her head against his chest and held her there. His large palm skirted the edges of her cheek as his fingers buried themselves in her disheveled tresses, and with a large sigh, her breathing began to even out.

He could feel his heart beat beneath her ear. There was something odd about that idea, and his brow flinched briefly into a frown.

"He's looking for you, you know," she said suddenly, her voice still thick from her tears.

Kylo blinked, his hand against her head pressing her a little closer.

"Of course he is," he said quietly.

Rey frowned against his chest and licked her lips. When she blinked her eyes, she could feel the wetness of her lashes as they brushed against her skin.

"What did I see…?" she began, moving her head slightly. "In those visions I had. The ones I showed you. What was—"

Kylo sighed and Rey felt as his thumb circle lightly against her cheek.

"It was me," he said flatly. His expression was utterly blank and she tried to shift in his arms to face him.

"You?" she echoed with a frown. "But…" she shook her head, trying to recall the toddler and the child and the teenager but snatched herself away every time her thoughts strayed too close to that door. Rey could feel the tears welling up again.

"You were just a child," she whispered, trying desperately to hold herself back.

He sighed and she rose and fell with the movement of his chest.

"Yes I was," he said simply.

Her face was stricken, and with a great deal of effort, she pushed herself around to sit sideway in his arms so that she sat the same direction she faced, and his hand lifted free. When she was duly settled, he brushed the back of his fingers against her cheek as he replaced it, resting his wrist against her shoulder.

"I went to Inventory today, looking for our supplies," she began absently.

"Oh?"

"When I asked if I could collect them, they said I couldn't take your mask and lightsaber," she continued, and an edge began to creep into her tone. She felt Kylo tense beneath her as he said nothing.
"The woman….she said they were evidence," she finally bit out.

When she was met with silence, again Rey had had enough. Pushing against him, she wiggled her head free and tilted her head up to look at him.

"Why?" she asked pointedly. She glared up at him as something pulled at her—some notion that something could have been different if he'd just taken some other path—any other path—than the one that led him to sitting in some cell waiting for the worst to be handed down to him. "Why did you do it?" she finished.

Kylo merely stared ahead. "Do what?" he asked blankly.

Rey frowned. "All of it!"

Kylo blinked, gaze still lost in the distance. "I wish that you would not ask me that ques—"

"But I'm asking it!" she insisted, grabbing up his shirt for leverage to try and pull herself higher to face him. It was now hopelessly stretched out in a dozen strange places. "Evidence, Kylo! She called it 'evidence'!"

She felt conflicting emotions leak into her voice.

"Shh," he chided lightly, shaking his head absently. She didn't feel like she was getting through to him. Wherever his mind was, it seemed very far away.

"Kylo!" she shouted in annoyance, and suddenly his face morphed into something horrific and both of his arms were back around her, pulling her tightly against him as he bowed over her, his hair brushing against her face.

"Rey…I could show you," he gasped shakily, "Just how you showed me your dream, I could show you, in one moment, everything I've ever done. Every betrayal, every angry moment, every punishment, every mission, every kill, every scream," he pushed out. Rey was frozen as his grip tightened to the point of almost hurting. She was trapped by his arms, unable to move, and a slow fear crept over her.

His chest heaved with a sigh and he shook his head. "I could show you," he continued. "but it still wouldn't answer your question. It couldn't tell you why…"

He pulled away and his eyes met hers. Her face was a mix of concern and trepidation and he instantly hated himself for it. He couldn't tell her why because there was no simple answer. It was a series of answers that not even he was sure he was totally confident about. He looked down at her, pained, as exhaustion leaked into his bones. He could see her eyes quiver with concern and mild shock passed through him.

"Don't do that," he said dryly.

Rey frowned as she tried to blink back the tears. "Do what?"

"Worry about me."

"What?" she asked incredulously as a tear escaped down the corner of her eye. He shook his head slowly.

"Don't worry about me, Rey."
Her bottom lip quivered slightly and she tucked herself back against his chest, trying and failing to sniff back fresh tears. Reaching back, he snatched the blanket folded untouched on his cot and flung it open, draping it over her shoulders. Tucking it close, he sighed and brushed his lips absently against the top of her head.

"Stay here tonight," he breathed against her hair. "It's safer this way."

He laid a hand over her shoulders. "Stop crying," he chided.

"I just want to know why," she insisted, curling her hands into herself.

"Why, Kylo?" she half whispered. "Why...why...." she repeated, and he tiled his head back and stared up at the ceiling in silence.

"Why..."

He licked at the corner of his mouth as he felt his own eyes begin to water but didn't let her go.

"Stop...please," he pleaded quietly. "Rest." She didn't listen.

"Why..." she murmured slowly now as dreamless sleep took her.

*I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry...*

Chapter End Notes

OH my god. Ok. So you know when you're hanging up a new picture for the first time? And it's BIG. MASSIVE. And you hang it on the nail by its back wire and when you stand back to look away, it's crooked, so you go back and try and straighten it. But when you stand back again, it's *still* crooked. So you go back. It's still crooked. And it's *still* crooked. AND A MILLION TIMES IT'S STILL CROOKED. That was the latter half of this chapter. That was the latter half of this chapter straight to hell. I don't do re-writes. I never do them. I rewrote the second half of this chapter at LEAST *five* (5) times. FIVE. And, a very special thanks to PoorQueequeg for reading over one of the crappy versions of it and giving me feedback (beta-ing is also something I rarely do). This was the hardest chapter I've ever done so far. And I'm sorry if any of it reads like garbage since I am still extremely worried over it but at least now it's in a place I'm ok with.

But I know you guys have been waiting so, so patiently, and once it got near enough for my liking, I wanted to go ahead and put it out. So thank you SO MUCH for the RECORD NUMBER OF COMMENTERS LAST CHAPTER HOLY GOODNESS I am just...I just don't deserve any of you, ok? Thank you to zaftiq, Killertopaz96, Nina10, arw5205, SheWearsBlackNColor, Just A Human, Chai, blueenvelopes935, Anna, Jessica, IsobelBloom, Jayra177, PoorQueequeg, Eroica, NakedVengeance, g_girl143, mweerden, ivylovesnarry, Karla, Caffeinated_Snail, aiCHA77, RJ_Anderson, Raxephan, kylojen, Asylleen, Jacnice, Mariya, DarkPhoenix-24, DauntlessSubconscious, Avdal, CharlotteCAgain, All_The_Feels, dalia_11, Plato, The_Dark_Becomes_You, Chakashi, DalekandtheTARDISat221B, Ciele, Allison, rachel_greatest, Nissian, Taryn, Patricia Ries (Tricia), Knekiken, Emmyjean, DasFeministMermaid, goddessfreyja, Muchadoaboutnada, Gabriela Frei, and
By_the_Willow. THANK YOU FOR READING AND COMMENTING AND SHARING THIS STORY WITH YOUR FRIENDS AND ARGH!!!

So, no new art since last time to share with you guys, but I hope to try and get back to doing weekly updates! I bled for this chapter, though- real life blood all over the place- but hopefully as we get closer to, ah, some stuff, it'll get easier. xD

Bless you all and see you next chapter!!
Dedicated to the anon who said this story helped them at the worst of their stressful times. Hang in there, anon. This is for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He was exhausted. Too afraid to sleep, only confident enough to push as much calm and buffer through the force as he could muster. To protect her. To protect them both.

Her tears dried against his shirt.

He couldn't bring himself to look at her.

Rey had seen more in one cruel vision from Snoke than his own mother, wandering several floors above him now, had ever seen. What was he trying to do—drive her from him? The gall. As he finally looked down at the girl in his arms, he smirked at the irony. If that was his plan, to try and break her down, turn her against him, it had backfired beautifully. He didn't understand them at all. He didn't understand her.

And yet at the same time, Kylo didn't understand how he had earned such trust from someone he'd once sworn to torture, capture, and then most likely destroy. Those thoughts, that time, suddenly seemed so outside him now, so utterly foreign, that he physically recoiled as much as the bed frame behind him would allow, and gripped Rey tighter in his arms.

She was mouthing something in her sleep. Frowning, he became distracted trying to watch, to make out what it was, but he couldn't decipher it at all. For all her hardness forged in the rough sands of the Jakku, her face was remarkably soft, and as he watched her mouth mumble in sleepy incoherent silence, he leaned forward and, carefully, lightly, rested his lips against her forehead.

"Ohh, Rey..." he whispered. What was it then? That he didn't know how this had happened? That he didn't know how they'd gotten here? He knew exactly how this had started. He had no excuses there.

He blinked several times, trying to shift his thoughts in order. "I made such a huge mistake, not accounting for him...," he frowned. "How could I not have accounted for him?" he asked absently, and shifted slightly to glance down at her sleeping face, his lips trailing against her forehead, before looking forward into the darkness.

Closing his eyes, he sighed. He could feel her, there, against the skin of his arms, her legs draped over his thigh. How could he let this happen? Fixing this... blocking Snoke and evading his grasp would be more work than he wanted to do alone. Before he would have had an army. Now there is nothing but him.

He sighed again and, shifting to hold her against him with one arm, reached back for his only allotted blanket and pulled it towards them.

Desperate to push away the crisis lit before him like a garish Alsakan Circo-Menagerie
performance he used to watch on old holographs as a child, his mind shifted rapidly from thought to thought, and continuously came back to wonder at the girl sleeping against his chest. He'd asked her to stay. And without protest, she had agreed.

Maybe it was out of necessity more than choice. Maybe she thought he'd logically be the only one who could help her if Snoke tried to get in again.

He grunted quietly as he tried to maneuver them both to lay comfortably on the floor before draping the cover over them.

But she didn't have to sit so close to him, his mind rattled on. Didn't have to curl herself against him when he'd made his request. She could have moved anywhere in the tiny cell. She could have even had the cot, as viciously uncomfortable as he found it.

_Not like that would bother her._

She moved against him and pressed herself closer to his side, her arm curling up and elbow jutting across his chest. Watching her settle, he sucked disconcertingly at his bottom lip before tucking the blanket around her and letting his head fall back against the cool steel flooring.

No. How could he even begin to fix this? He couldn't even fix himself.

—

Rey awoke before lights on. A dim, blue glow emanated from the small window into Kylo's cell, and as she flexed her fingers, she found she was half splayed over him. She didn't remember laying on the floor.

Rey winced, and the skin on her face felt like it crackled as the salt from her dried tears broke apart from her expression. She sighed quietly and her fingers found the edge of the blanket around them and tugged it a little closer. It was more for comfort than anything. Kylo was still a furnace. He was always a furnace. And the part of her that remained the desert pressed closer ever so slightly to soak up that heat and she sighed.

She felt the ribbing of his shirt under her fingers as they mindlessly glided up his chest following the pattern, but when they hit something smooth and hard she froze. Carefully she shifted her head to look up and spotted her traitorous fingertips resting on the skin just below his neck. She stared at them, at the touch, and a breath hitched in her throat as she felt a weak sort of electricity cling to the point of contact. Her brow furrowed, and she lifted her fingers before lightly replacing them against his skin again. The static seemed to stretch and spark with her movement, growing strong again every time she made contact. She rested them there finally before carefully trailing them up to the base of his neck and back again. The feeling dragged with her, she noted, with the motion. She let her fingertips wander back to his collarbone, against the side of his neck, down his throat. She'd made physical contact with Luke before- all those times he'd grabbed her hand with his own flesh and blood one to help her up after getting knocked to the ground during training. It had never been like this. Whatever this was, it…

A slight shine caught her eye and when she glanced up, she saw Kylo looking down at her through cracked eyelids. His face was soft from sleep as her fingertips froze against his throat. She said nothing as they stared at each other in the near-dark of his cell. Blinking a few times rapidly, she raised up as if to speak before a strange look overtook her face, and with a scrunch of her nose, she clapped a hand over her mouth before doubling over with a high-pitched sneeze.

Rey groaned, rubbing at her tingling face, when she felt rather than heard a low laugh rumbling
"Are you laughing at me?" she asked testily, scratching at her nose.

He rolled his head against the floor, a suspiciously large smile plastered on his face. "Never."

Rey huffed. "You're laughing at me."

His grin grew wider and she swore she could see teeth. Really, he was insufferable.

Reaching up, she made a grab for a bit of flesh through the fabric of his shirt and pinched.

He yelped, jerking violently- his reaction vastly exceedingly Rey's expectations. It was her turn to laugh until the light seeping from the tiny window was rapidly eclipsed and she was caged suddenly against him.

"Stop it," he growled. "There's still some time before the wake-up call. Sleep."

Rey sighed. A part of her was surprised that he could ever be this practical.

"Kylo…" she mumbled against him. There was no answer, just the steady rise and fall of his chest, and as it carried Rey along with it, it threatened to lull her back to sleep herself. She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Kylo!" she said, shaking her head vigorously.

"What?"

"I should go."

"Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'? It's morning. I have things to do."

Kylo heaved a large sigh and turned his head away to glance at his door. Stretching his arm briefly behind his head, casting the shadow of his bicep across her face before bringing it once more around her, he grunted as he turned back and found himself nuzzling his face against her hair. He froze mid-breath after realizing what he had done, and he hoped to the ancient deities she was still somehow half asleep. He felt his prayers might've been answered when she said nothing and didn't pull away either. He tried to relax.

"No one expects you to be up before first call," he said finally.

Rey shook her head but only managed to bury his face deeper against her. "No, but I like to be."

He huffed, the corner of his mouth threatening to quirk up despite his agitation. "Old habits die hard."

"What was that?" she asked.

Kylo shook his head and slowly disentangled himself from her. "Nothing," he said quietly.

He watched as Rey pushed up to sit cross-legged in front of him and proceeded with what was now the familiar routine of trying to smooth herself out. Folding his arms behind his head, he looked up at her in the half light as she worked, occasionally spared him testy glances.
As she tried to collect herself, she patted herself down, looking around the predominantly empty space before her eyes spotted a dark pool of something coiled on the floor. Even in the dimness he could make out the pink that suddenly lit up her cheeks. Leaning over, she reached towards it and came away with his cowl. He frowned and watched as she ran it absently through her fingers before pushing himself up to sit across from her.

"You still have it?" he asked, the sentence coming out more as a statement than a question.

Rey's brow furrowed as her fingers traced along the texture of the cloth.

"Well you gave it to me. It's mine now."

"I loaned it to you," he said with a smirk.

Rey didn't look at him, instead choosing to bite the inside of her cheek as she tried to gather it up.

She rose to her feet and Kylo rose with her, but when she tried to step around him, he held out his arm, gently pushing her back.

"Why do you carry that, Rey?"

She was determined not to look up at him. Mostly it was out of defiance, but it was also because she didn't really have an answer to that question. Why did she carry it? Making sure it was always in a pocket, or always nearby. She had even lied about what it was. Why had she done that?

Slowly she found the fabric slipping through her fingers as he took it from her and her breath seized. She looked up at him half in mild alarm, half in embarrassment, but his eyes read as something else entirely.

Why did she still have it?

His eyes. She couldn't read that look in his eyes.

He held the fabric open in his hands and, lifting it above her, draped it over her head. Confusion was clearly written on her features but he ignored it, instead choosing to carefully drape the ends along their opposite sides until the cowl fit comfortably over her. His work finished, he rested his hands along her arms, his gaze searching hers.

"It's yours," he whispered.

Rey looked at him with wide eyes and swallowed hard.

"…thank you," she said finally.

With a small nod, he dropped his hands and became intensely interested in the floor.

"Rey…I'm not sure yet what Snoke is attempting to do, but it would be easier if…"

Rey listened in silence as her fingers absently reached up to nervously toy with the edge of his-her-cowl.

He glancing up at her before clearing his throat with a pained expression. "What I'm saying is he seems to be able to get at us more easily when we are apart. I'd like you to stay nearby, as you've done…” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "…at least until I can figure out a strategy."

Rey's brow flickered. "How do you plan on doing that from inside the cell? Don't tell me you're
"No," he answered quickly, looking up at her. "No….I don't plan on escaping. We've already had that conversation."

He took in a heavy breath. "I have ways of investigating…through the Force." 

_Oh_, she thought. _Yes, that._

Finally, she nodded. "Alright. I would agree," she replied slowly. "On one condition."

Kylo looked up. "And what would that be?"

Rey pressed her lips together in determination. "That whatever you find out, if it proves to be useful information about Snoke, I can report it back."

He blinked back his surprise and immediately found himself strategizing. She could do that- it wouldn't matter to him anymore. But if it were information he could use for himself…

"I offer a counter-proposal," he replied, standing a bit straighter. This time it was Rey's turn to show surprise.

"You can tell them what you want so long as you clear precisely what it is with me first."

Rey frowned. "But—"

"If it's something big, something I can use as a bargaining chip, I want to use it, Rey."

He looked down at her and willed the seriousness of it to get through to her. "I need you to understand…or the alternative is that I cannot trust you and I will tell you nothing," he stated solemnly. His brows dipped as he blinked, swallowing hard. "…and I admit I would not like that," he added quietly.

Rey felt as if something awful dripped down her spine and she shook her head. "No! No…Kylo…you can…" -the feeling was such a foreign one but- "…I agree." No, she couldn't bring herself to say it.

"I'll speak with you first," she concluded finally.

He nodded. "Thank you," he said, pulling back slightly in surprise as the words left his mouth.

Taking in a deep breath, Rey sighed. "Well then," she said in a more chipper tone. "I guess I'll be back later."

She tried to grin up at him when the cowl slipped away slightly. Reflexively he reached up to pull it back forward, adjusting it to perfectly halo around her face, and suddenly he was met with an image of her, dressed in black, as one of his Knights. His eyes grew wide.

"Kylo?" she asked, staring at him as his eyes seemed to glass over.

_He saw her with a double-ended saber, virtually flying through the air as she cut down the foes of the Order until reemerging at his side- his gift to her draped lovingly about her pretty face. At least it would be lovely, the last thing those wretched souls would see._

Rey frowned. "Kylo?" she insisted, waving a hand in front of his face. Finally he blinked widely, eyes focusing back on her as his hands fell away.
"Are you alright?" she asked.

He stared at her, mind trying to briefly reconcile the image that had flashed before his mind and the reality before him.

"Yes," he said suddenly. "Later. I'll be here."

She gave a strange half smile and slowly walked around him towards the door. She raised her fist to knock when she paused, turning back.

"What do you do all day?" she asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

He turned and shrugged. "Today? I think….another interrogation."

"I thought there was some preliminary trial going on?"

"What's the difference?"

Rey smirked and, turning back, gave three strong knocks.

—

Rey hadn't been gone five minutes before he was found propping himself against his cell wall, head bowed over, suddenly filled with thoughts of what it would be like if Rey had agreed to come with him that fateful night on Starkiller.

Ohhh, so much trouble that could have been avoided, he thought vehemently.

She would work directly beneath him- his right-hand. Finally a suitable replacement for Xislet Ren who had been ambushed fifty to one, taking down over half the opposition before finally succumbing to his wounds. That had been a significant loss, but Rey would do perfectly. She would exceed Xislet Ren in every way under his command. Under his control. Under him.

Kylo choked on his breath as his forehead banged into the wall. Where in the hell did that thought come from?

His chest heaved and he brought his free hand to press against his groin and the suddenly building pressure there. No, dammit, this is not the place.

He hissed through clenched teeth, trying to will himself back under some semblance of control as his thoughts ran away, dragging him helplessly along with them.

No….she….that isn't for her, he insisted, staring angrily at the wall in front of him. But it would be so simple, his mind continued, and he let go a sigh closing his eyes.

A strange feeling started to fall over him. She had already asked him before why he didn't just leave. She'd hinted at it, in a way, again just now, he reasoned. And she came to him, meaning she currently had a need for him. He scoffed. His idiot of an uncle never even taught her enough to keep intrusions into sleep away. Granted, even for him when it came to Snoke it was a significant challenge. Still, she needed him.

She needed him. Even if she was only using him as a ward.

What she didn't know was at this point, he needed her, too, and for the exact same purpose. She was right- they were bound together. He had felt it when Snoke first ripped apart her dreams, and who knows what she had experienced on her end. He would have to ask. But besides all that-
giving his head a quick shake in an effort to clear it- perhaps she could be persuaded. Perhaps they could leave together. He could talk her into preparing a ship and he could take them back to *The Finalizer*- no matter what he may have done, if he returned with the scavenger at his side, *his*, to mould into his Equal and Worthy Knight, a Force User that met, possibly exceeded, his own power…they would be unstoppable, *together*, and the Supreme Leader….the Supreme Leader…..

Kylo's face contorted suddenly as rage shot through him, and the noise that welled up and out of his chest started softly at first, before sharply increasing in volume as he slammed his hand against the metal plated wall.

*SNOKE.*

Kylo could feel the laugh distantly, like an absent itch, echoing just behind his eyes and with a scream he reared back and slammed his head into the wall instead. Kylo was *furious*. The laughing only grew louder.

"*Your weakness around the girl betrays you, Kylo R—*"

With another wild shriek, Kylo slammed his head into the wall and with it forced up every mental defense he could tap into. The voice ceased.

Panting, and with an incredible headache, he slid down the wall to his knees. Slumped against the cold metal, he tilted his forehead to a side that didn't feel bruised and squeezed his eyes shut.

*Goddammit.*

*Goddammit!*

Snoke really was desperate to find him, somehow even bombarding Rey with things she never needed to see- things that *no one* ever needed to see. Her crazed face from the night before swam in front of his vision and he *whimpered*. Even now, somehow, Snoke was able to slip through the cracks, into both of them. Into Rey.

Checking that things were locked tight, he relaxed some against the cool steel. The Supreme Leader was tempting him. This was a new tactic.

How could he have ever wished her the kind of fate his knights shared? Rey belonged here, to herself, even if he found himself reluctantly admitting that a small part of him did find the idea he was just presented with very appealing. And he belonged….where *did* he belong? He was Kylo Ren, hunted like an animal by the First Order, tortured in dreams by his own master, baited by visions like a weak-minded fool, and unlikely to have any sway at all over his own contingent of knights.

What was he now? Was he *anything*?

Well….There was always B—

*NO.* Dead. Gone. *Forever.*

Kylo sighed in frustration and tried to lift away from the wall before falling back against it again. Nothing was right anymore.

There was a click and the door began its steady slide open. Kylo ignored it.

Silence prevailed, until a familiar voice called, "It's time to go."
Oh yes. The addition to my torment has arrived.

Kylo turned to look at his mother who appeared more harried than annoyed and watched as her face suddenly fell into deep concern. She gaped at him.

"B…Kylo? Are you alright?" she asked, taking a step towards him before seemingly remembering herself and stopping in her tracks. Her desire to reach out for him was clear. Kylo was grateful she held back.

"Fine," he croaked. His fingers traced against the metal rivets along the wall seam.

Leia's face softened. "You don't look fine," she said softly.

Kylo didn't look at her. He had the sudden desire to make her leave. He needed to be alone, to shore up his defenses further and come up with some strategy to protect himself from Snoke's reach.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she continued timidly.

His eyes snapped onto hers and his gaze bored into her as he rolled his jaw slightly. "No."

Unsteadily he rose to his feet and turned back to the wall, wiping a hand quickly across his face before turning back to the woman responsible for bringing him into this miserable world.

It's your fault I have to deal with this. It's your fault I have to figure this out for the both of us.

Rey factored into his considerations strongly, he realized. Together they were stronger- that part wasn't fantasy, it was fact. But nothing was guaranteed. Gods, when did that happen when he'd gone into this with plans just to use her? He didn't know what to do with any of this.

Leia slowly reared back, blinking up at her son. His full height was still a new experience for her. He was indifferent.

"Have you eaten?" she asked evenly.

"No."

"Are you—"

"No."

Leia pressed her lips together as he stared down at her blankly. Searching his face and finding nothing helpful in it, she squared her shoulders.

"Then it's time to go."

—

Kylo Ren sat disheveled before the judging committee, his hair still a rumpled mess, cuffed to the chair specially bolted to the floor just for him after his previous display. He didn't look at anyone-just stared at a spot on the floor and said nothing.

He listened absently as his court-appointed defense rattled off a quaint narrative of his broken childhood. Most of it wasn't far off the mark, but the interpretation was all wrong, he thought, subtly shaking his head every now and then. He assumed this was done in an effort to twist things more in his favor. If he were honest, he was surprised the older man even showed up after he had
thrown him out of his cell before. Well, like he said, it was his job. How many First Order officers, he wondered, would use that as a defense only to have it shot down by these people? And yet it was perfectly acceptable coming from a man who most likely wanted nothing to do with him.

*Hypocrites.*

They thought they were better than the Order but at the end of the day the results were the same no matter who won- billions dead, trillions more in the balance of a capricious entity either in the form of the Supreme Leader or the so-called 'Republic'.

He could feel Leia's eyes on him and he glanced up through his mussed bangs. Her brow was furrowed with concern as she looked at him, hands folded in front of her mouth.

*What would she care?* he thought bitterly, and tugged slightly at his restraints.

The council seemed to listen to his defense's words with surprisingly keen interest. Of course they'd love the family drama, he assumed. Who wouldn't love to hear all of the intimate dirt on their General in command? He smirked.

When the prosecution began their counter-argument, Kylo had to tune them out. The first sentence out of the unknown woman's mouth was infuriating and he didn't care what she had to say anyway. When Kylo had to think about a list of all the things that mattered, this woman and her *bullshit* sat so far at the bottom of the list it might as well be at the center of a black hole's ring of singularity, time-locked, where no one need hear it ever again. And honestly, he had very little on that list anyway. He'd blasted full-tilt out of the Order, pummeled Hux on his way out, cut off all communication as Snoke continued to pick around his defenses to try and make a connection and locate him. He gave a short laugh. Ohh, he was dead for sure if Snoke ever found him.

"Something you'd like to add, Kylo Ren?"

Kylo's mind snapped to, expression evaporating as he looked up. "What?" he bit back.

"If there is nothing, the court would like to remind you to keep silent, or speak through your defense."

Kylo's lip twitched and he shifted in his seat.

"Does the defense for the accused have a comment to make?"

Petrova looked towards his client who was currently rolling his shoulders back in agitation despite the short lead of his cuffs.

"Kylo?" he asked quietly.

Kylo said nothing, instead choosing to stare intently at Major Ematt who seemed to be presiding over this farce. He took in his overly long, rapidly graying hair, the scruffy beard…did no one in the Resistance take pride in their appearance? Perhaps there was just no time for it when you're constantly running from the First Order like rats from a pack of rabid cats.

Kylo shook his head. "No," he said in a low voice. "No comments."

Major Ematt nodded curtly before switching back to business.

Kylo slipped back into his thoughts and as soon as his vision faded back into some indistinct place, Leia resumed her observation of her son. She could see he was actively trying to ignore the
proceedings, and it frustrated her. It frustrated her how little he cared about his own outcome in all
this.

Leia was no fool. She knew the likely inevitable outcome of all this— the last remnant of her family,
her own family, executed and taken from her. She felt the bile rise in her throat at the thought and
stared at him more intently. He was here, right now, right in front of her— alive, whole— as whole as
he could be. Breathing. That was all that mattered right now.

She wished badly he'd wake up from whatever haze he was in and save himself. Petrova was good,
but he wasn't good enough to save someone the entire universe knew to be guilty as sin.

She sighed quietly. His face had been mostly a picture of disinterest, changing time an again into
subtle, other things. Part of her was curious what was going through his mind but she concluded it
was probably better that she remained in the dark. Her eyes lingered on his face as he quietly
chewed his bottom lip— yes, she remembered that habit of his— and found her head tilting slightly as
she watched his face soften almost imperceptibly and all his fidgeting ceased. He grew very still
then, and she watch as his eyes became alert once more and shifted towards the wall without
moving his head. Whatever had his attention was just outside.

Leia reached out gently with the Force to feel in the same direction and was surprised to sense Rey
there. She frowned. The girl seemed to be paused in the hall just outside of the conference room,
speaking with a gaggle of technicians. Leia sensed that Rey was engrossed in the conversation and
didn't notice any of them in the room at all. Looking back at her son, she saw his head had tilted
more towards Rey's direction and felt a small barrier rise up between them. He was blocking her
out. Why?

She knew Rey had spent two nights in a row down in the prison cell with her son. She'd been called
in last night, too, to observe. No one expected Rey to be the one in a state this time, and Kylo to be
the one to calm her down.

As Rey passed by on the other side of the wall, Kylo's eyes followed until she passed into the other
quadrant and he swallowed, blinking, as he lost track of her, and his eyes darted quickly back to the
floor.

Rey.

Something about that girl. Maybe it was just this new generation of kids. Kylo responded to her as
he had to no one since being brought on base, and since no one else could get a word in edge-wise
to him, she quietly praised herself for her decision to let Rey go unimpeded as she saw fit to and
from his cell.

Maybe she can talk some sense into him, she thought to herself. Maybe I've been trying to reason
with the wrong person.

"Anything else before this session is ended?" Ematt's voice called throughout the space. When
there was no reply, his eyes fell onto Kylo, still staring at the floor, still saying nothing.

"Kylo Ren, you have been in Resistance custody for over three days. Do you have any comments
or requests with regards to your accommodations, keeping in mind that it is at this council's
discretion to approve, deny, and revoke anything you may ask for?"

Kylo was silent, eyes darting about in front of him, and Ematt nearly opened his mouth to speak
until Kylo looked up.
"A comb," he called out. Some of the council members looked at each other questioningly. Ematt merely arched a brow.

"A comb?"

Kylo tilted his head as if to say 'did you not hear me the first time (you old fool):" and Ematt glanced in Leia's direction. Leia stared back before his attention returned to the prisoner.

"Granted."

The court finally adjourned with little fanfare and Kylo was left alone with his public defender as everyone, including the General, filed out of the hall one by one. Her gaze lingered on him before he turned away and gave another half-hearted tug at his restraints. In the now empty space, Petrova grabbed a chair and dragged it noisily against the floor before sitting it diagonally from him and taking a seat with a drawn-out sigh.

"You know, it'd be easier if you helped a bit," he mumbled, looking through his stack of papers. Kylo said nothing.

"It'd help if your mother helped a bit, too."

Kylo arched a brow, glaring at his attorney. Petrova rolled his eyes and scoffed.

"Oh please. Don't look at me like that. You know very well it would help your case if the General spoke up. And yes I tried." He sighed. "She said if it was a choice between influencing the council, and speaking in your defense and being kicked off the council, she'd rather stick with the influencing."

Kylo's mouth twitched as he slowly jutted his jaw. "Of course," he muttered.

"I'm not saying that's a bad tactic. It's just not my tactic," he continued as he focused on punching something in on his datapad.

"You're gonna have to decide, kid," he began, attentions still absorbed in his work, "whether or not you want to survive this trial. Whether or not you want to live. And don't give me that bullshit about how you don't care- we both know that's a lie."

Kylo stared at him in mild disbelief. Petrova punched in a couple more things in silence before the door slid open, General Organa waiting on the other side.

"When you decide," the older man said, "Let me know, because we have some work to do."

He glanced up at Kylo over his pad before finishing up, tossing it rather roughly into his folder, and rising to his feet.

"He's all yours, General," he said as he passed her on the way out.

Leia gave a halfhearted smile before turning back to her son. Two guards passed on either side of her, releasing Kylo from his restraints, and escorting him back to his cell. When he stepped back inside, he stood, lost, in the center of the small space. She watched him wander from the doorway, concern marring her face.

"I don't know what's going on with you right now…but if you want to live, you need to get your shit together," she said in a level voice.
Kylo paused before turning to face her. "Are you and Petrova reading from the same script?" he snapped. There was a pause. "What do you care if I live or die?" he said with an incredulous smile. "You've paid more attention to me in these last three days than you ever did when I was a child. I'm not sure whether I should be flattered or offended."

Leia huffed. "That's a lie and you know it."

Kylo half rolled his eyes as quiet overtook them again, and he turned away to stare at the opposite wall.

"You are my only child, Ben, Kylo, whatever you want to call yourself- it doesn't change that." she said pointedly, breaking the silence, and her eyes filled with emotion. "You are my son."

The door closed and Kylo felt his chest seize. No. What is that supposed to mean now? Hadn't today been enough without her saying that to him?

He moved unsteadily to his cot and sank down into the oversprung frame and hard mattress. No, he didn't need her emotions on top of everything else. He didn't need them at all.

Closing his eyes, he propped his elbows on his knees and put his head in his hands. Gods, he could feel it, the frustrated tears. He hated this. Hated the weakness. Hated the displacement. What was he?

By the time Rey arrived several hours later he was much the same, and she passed through the doorway almost unnoticed.

"Kylo?" she asked quietly. When he looked up, she saw his face splotched with red and an unmistakeable shine to his cheeks. Her day had been one of the better ones, light and relatively care-free. She'd just come from the fresher in high spirits at being clean from all the grit and grime of working on hyperdrives all day, but as she approached him now her brow furrowed with concern until he was reaching out for her and she found her torso wrapped in his arms, his head buried against her stomach.

"Kylo?" she asked again. She didn't know what to do. Her hands rested atop his shoulders and she felt the tiny up and down tremor of disguised sobs as he gripped her tighter, clinging, as if she were the last stable thing in the universe.

Slowly her hands moved across his back until one found its way into his hair, brushing her fingers through the tousled and tangled locks. She curled down over him, cradling his head against her not knowing what else to really do.

"I guess the trial didn't go too well…" she murmured absently, running her fingers through his hair again. He said nothing, and they stayed there, locked together in silence, as she continued to trace her fingers against his head, brushing her thumb against the edge of his ear, until he stilled against her.

"Come on," she said finally, and pulling away, he released her, letting his head bow, as she tugged him by the wrist towards the center of the space. She reached past him quickly to take up the thin blanket. She really should bring her own from her room. They were going unused anyway….

He settled against her on the floor, his mind finally, blessedly, blank as her fingertips soothed his cheek.

Rey found herself smiling softly as the lights clicked off overhead at curfew. She felt when he slipped into sleep and rested her hand comfortably against his neck.
Rey walked into the canteen, lost in thought, never noticing Poe and Finn already well established in the far corner of the hall. She looked chipper as she grabbed up her customary flaky pastry and cup of caf and bit into it eagerly as she looked over her datapad.

"Do you know what's been going on with her lately?" Finn asked.

Poe blinked, giving his head a quick shake. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that after 21:00 no one sees her," he said pointedly.

Poe laughed quietly. "Look, I see her every day in the hanger- nobody works harder. You can't blame her for hitting the hay earlier than most people," he said, trying to reason with his clearly concerned friend. "Besides, you have to remember- she had a routine before she came to us. When the sun set on Jakku, I'm sure she tried to get as much sleep as she could in that sand trap. Old habits die hard, you know."

Finn shook his head in frustration. "You don't get it. When I knocked on her door last night, she didn't answer, Poe."

Poe frowned. "Well…" he began thinking. "Maybe she just—"

"And I knocked the night before, too," he interrupted.

Poe narrowed his eyes. "And?"

"She wasn't there."

Finn sighed and looked across the hall towards his friend.

"I'm worried, Poe. Wherever she's going at night…it isn't home."

Chapter End Notes

OK, guys, I am trash for being so bad about updates. I'm so sorry. I can't say that enough. But there will be ANOTHER update VERY SOON- as in DAYS- so if you want to get on the comment appreciation train for next chapter, you better hop on soon.

Speaking of which, a very huge massive thank you to you patient readers Mweerden, DalekandtheTARDISat221B, aiCHa77, Plato, Muchadoaboutnada, Chai, PoorQueequeg, Karla, Anna, The_Dark_Becomes_You, book_worm321, Jayra177, destinybread, sarena, Killertopaz96, DasFeministMermaid, arw5205, All_The_Feels, Nina10, IsobelBloom, La_Catrina, Raxephan, Meowl0Ren, blueenvelopes935, neternefer, lolita_iori, reyvenpi, victoriasmom98, kylling, CharlotteCAgain, IshaRen, Just+A+Human, Allison, Amygdala, trashfan2003, Palom, and Abby. You all have kept me chugging and I don't know what I'd do without you.

So my excuses are pretty poor for the delay, although the mystery illness that started
from the very moment I wrote this fic makes it as much as part of the narrative as the story itself at this point, haha. But essentially said thing remains a mystery and I'm actually going in first thing tomorrow morning for an x-ray to see if it can't see what my doctor can't seem to. So...hopefully there will be some answers there. Between that annoying the ever loving shit out of me, a crappy job, and a GOOD job that may actually take me someplace (if I live long enough lolol), things have been crazy. But like I said, another update will be happening in the next couple days- I am determined. So thank you all for still reading and see you very, very soon. ;)}
I need her.

This game had gone on for days—Rey sneaking into his cell, sleeping next to him. He found his hands on her skin more, spurred on by the strange electricity that seemed to spring from her very cells. It stung, slightly…but he liked it.

As the days wore on he began to realize that through his last days in the Order, his race across the stars, until he was drawn finally to her and this awful base, the one constant was her.

It was a risk. She had come out of nowhere when all this started. Ohhh, but wasn't he a risk taker? Didn't he love these things? Although every risk he'd ever taken had blown up spectacularly in his face…perhaps she…..

I need her.

Another night. They had been working on control, mental blocks to try and filter Snoke out. Filter each other out, if need be. Rey had shared, after some persistent pestering from himself, the times when his emotions had brought her to her knees. He held her more closely those nights. It was the best he could do.

"There was talk today," she said conversationally as she sat across from him.

"Oh?"

Rey loved these casual chats. He knew they were pointless, but he loved to listen to her speak. He knew, much like himself, that she had had no one to really just talk to in years. So he listened carefully. It wasn't always mundane, and he liked the lit of her voice as she spoke.

She nodded at him conspiratorially. "There seems to be readings that indicate a camp has formed just outside the monitored perimeter."

He quirked a brow. "What kind of camp?"

Rey shrugged. "Don't know. Apparently this desolate planet actually hosts life."

"You mean like what we ran into."

She nodded.

"If you could call that 'life'" he snickered, and Rey grinned.

"Apparently we were rather lucky to have not run into more of it. But it's probably nothing. Just more of the same."

Kylo tossed his head slightly, hair smooth and distractingly similar in style to the first time they’d met face to face. "Then why tell me?"

She looked down with a shrug, picking at her boot strings. "Dunno. It's just been so boring around here that this was the first interesting thing that's happened in ages," she replied, scrunching her
nose in mild displeasure.

Kylo gave a small smile. "I thought you liked routine?"

Rey arched a brow. "I lived and breathed routine for fourteen years. I think I've had more than my fair share of it."

Kylo's eyes grew wide as he stared at her. She had finally tasted freedom, he realized. And she liked it. No, she could never be a Jedi. She would go crazy first.

*I need her.*

He gave a sudden huff of a laugh as his eyes leveled with hers with an intensity that made Rey blink. Finally, he nodded. "Alright then," he said with a twist of his lip. "Again- use half strength this time and see if you can still keep me out."

—

Leia sat back in her chair, nursing a cup of black tea as the steam wafted its delicate scents of citrus towards her nose. Somewhere in the back of her mind she swore she could sense vanilla as well. She took a gentle sip, wrapping her fingers around the warm mug as her eyes wandered over to a carefully bundled package sitting on her desk. The thick paper still crinkled periodically as it settled, simple twine holding it together. She gave a small smile thinking about the honest simplicity of the sender when there was a gentle knock at her door.

Leia leaned forward, eyes attentive, as she placed her mug onto her desk.

"Yes, come in," she called.

The door slid open and Rey stepped cautiously in, a sweet smile gracing her face as soon as she saw the General.

"Hello," she said quietly. "You asked for me?"

Leia's brows rose. "Yes! Please, take a seat, Rey."

Rey's smile widened briefly before turning a little nervous as she settled into the proffered chair. Leia's fingers wrapped around her cooling mug and she beamed at the young woman sitting in front of her.

"How are things, Rey?" she asked earnestly.

Rey blinked. "Fine!" she said quickly. "Fine! I mean…it's taken a little getting used to since this is the longest I've ever stayed on base before, but I'm adjusting."

Leia gave her a playful side-eye. "What, you mean you don't miss living in a hut in the middle of a world ocean with no electricity and nothing but my brother's questionable cooking?"

Rey laughed. "Well there are certainly benefits to being here but…." she smiled softly at her "I lived for years sort of like that. And frankly Luke's cooking is better than my old rations any day," she concluded, wrinkling her nose.

Leia's expression wavered. "Yes, you certainly did live in challenging circumstances before. And I'm so glad you made it to us somehow."

Rey's face softened and she began to pick idly at the fibers sticking up from the arm rest.
"What can I do for you, General?" she finally asked.

"Oh yes," Leia said with a small gasp as her hand landed on the package, causing it to crackle loudly. "It would seem something has arrived for you."

Leia pushed the package across the table to Rey who gingerly took it in hand and set it onto her lap.

"What…?"

"It's from my brother. They're some of your belongings."

Rey looked up in surprise and Leia could feel some of the trepidation coming off her.

"Not all of them," she continued. "He said he wanted to give you some incentive to come back."

Rey's shoulders seemed to relax slightly as she sighed, letting go of her subconscious worry, and her fingers began to pick at the knot holding everything together. Leia steepled her fingers and watched in interested silence.

"He said there were some clothes, some other personal effects you might need. Everything else is exactly where you left it. Luke says you've made quite a home for yourself on that little island of his."

Finally loosening the twine, Rey pulled it aside and carefully pushed open the paper. Inside were some of her homemade soaps, a few small tools she'd actually been looking for the other day and had feared were lost in the crash weeks ago, and a couple other things, all wrapped neatly inside her worn and sand-beaten clothing from Jakku. A couple shades lighter now that it had had a good wash and a briny bath in the sun, she ran her fingertips along the thin fabric as her mind ran through those early days when she had found Finn.

"He says he was surprised you didn't ask to come back," Leia mentioned casually, breaking the silence.

Rey looked up, confused. "I don't understand."

"I mean," she began, leaning back in her chair. Her tea mug was now abandoned to the corner of her desk. "that once we had Kylo Ren in custody you really hadn't needed to stay much longer beyond that."

Rey's eyes widened and she swallowed hard. Is she telling me to go?

"No, no, it's nothing like that," Leia continued, seeing the girl's expression. "I mean that I know you're busy with your training. I've seen you myself out in the greenhouse practicing."

Rey's cheeks turned a pale shade of pink at the idea of being watched as she shakily went through her forms without a teacher to correct her. She looked down and gripped her belongings.

"Well I-I-"

"Which is fine, by the way. You practicing there."

Rey gave a self-conscious bob of her head. "Thank you," she replied automatically, and licked her lips. "I guess I just wanted to be around more people for a little while. See my friends," she continued.

Leia arched a brow. "Nothing to do with, say…” she began with a shake of her head, "a certain
young man, currently in a holding cell several levels below?"

Rey stared at her wide-eyed in barely concealed shock.

"Why…why would…"

"No reason," she said casually. "Just if he's what's keeping you here, you shouldn't worry about it. I think we've got things under control."

"Oh," Rey said absently, still frozen in place.

Leia waited for her to say something more, but when all she did was half gape at her, she decided to take mercy.

"You are welcome to stay as long as you like, though, Rey."

Rey frowned and gave a quick nod. "I appreciate that, General."

Leia gave her a wide smile and, with a slow nod of her head, motioned that she could go. Gripping her things tightly under one arm, Rey rose to her feet and calmly made for the door.

"Rey?" the General called as the girl's hand hovered over the door switch. Rey turned perhaps a little more quickly than was necessary, brows raised in question.

Leia's mind raced with what to say to her, but she came up with nothing concise, nothing she feared might scare her away, and so she merely sighed, "Thank you."

Rey's brows rose higher, not knowing exactly what to say or what she did to deserve those words. In mild confusion she slowly smiled and, hitting the door controls, she departed.

Rey didn't go back to her room. She felt a cold chill fall over her and instead went straight to her makeshift practice space. Putting her small bundle of belongings carefully on a nearby bench, she propped herself over it hanging her head. Something…there was something about what Leia said that bothered her, but she couldn't quite….

Squeezing her eyes shut, she tilted her head and reached—feeling out for that thing that constantly thrummed in the back of her consciousness to a beat that had become all too familiar. When she pulled, uncertainly, she was surprised when he almost immediately pulled back. 'I'm here', it seemed to say, and she let go her breath.

Yes, she thought to herself as she moved to the center of the clearing and unhooked her saber. Flicking it on, she shifted into her first stance.

She moved for what seemed like hours from routine to routine, starting over and repeating every single one she felt had been executed poorly. Her entire effort poured into it, clearing her mind almost entirely, and she was jarred from her focus when a familiar face came into view from the doorway.

"Rey!" Finn shouted, waving broadly as he headed towards her through the greenery. "So this is where you've been hiding out, eh?" he said with a grin.

Rey lowered her weapon breathing heavily as he got closer. Her thoughts were on nothing but battle and hypothetical foes and part of her was almost angry at him for the disruption as he finally got close.
Staying a safe distance away from the Jedi Padawan, Finn glanced warily at her glowing weapon until a waving overhead distracted him, causing him to look up at the massive potted trees.

"I didn't even know this place existed," he said with a sense of wonder.

Rey's brow twitched as she deactivated her weapon. "How did you find me?"

"We heard talk of Skywalker's scary apprentice coming down here to practice."

Rey scoffed. "They did not say scary."

Finn furrowed his brow. "Skills of a terrifying level!" he continued, and Rey grinned and elbowed him in the side as she stepped up to join his survey of the vegetation.

"No, but," Finn began, composing himself. "There's going to be a get-together tonight with the pilots and some of the techs. We want you to come join us," he said with a grin.

As her breathing finally leveled out, she hooked her saber back onto her belt. "Get-together? At what time?"

He looked over at her, biting his lip nervously as he spoke. "Welllll…because the drinks won't arrive until tonight's shipment, it won't get started until about 21:00 or so? I know it's a bit late, but you can make it, right?"

Rey's face looked pained as she thought about it. 21:00 was about the time she made her way to the prison level. And things had been progressing lately- the time she spent with Kylo was now as much a part of her training as her form practice during the day. Learning to mentally keep out Snoke was absolutely vital, and without knowing when Kylo's time in front of the council might conclude, she was terrified of missing any opportunity to learn how to stop the poisonous scratch that occasionally tried to break through the back of her mind.

Rey bit the inside of her cheek with resignation. "I'm sorry, Finn. I can't."

Finn's face fell, and it tugged at her heart.

"What do you mean you can't?" he insisted. "Rey, you have to come out with us! It's been too long."

He pleaded with her with his eyes and Rey pleaded back. "You have to come out with us," he begged.

She gave a pained sigh. "I'm sorry. I have things I have to do. I'm sorry."

Moving past him, Rey raised her hand to squeeze his shoulder and gave him an apologetic look before bending down to collect her paper-wrapped package.

"But Rey…" Finn began. She turned back to give him a sad smile.

"Thank you, though," she called back. "I'm…I'm sorry, but thank you."

Tucking her things close, she left the humid space for the cool air of the base, leaving Finn behind in confused silence.

Kylo ran his comb through his still-damp hair, parting it carefully to the side as he worked to curve
the ends in exactly the way he liked. He wasn't entirely sure where that vanity came from, but at the end of the day he didn't question it- he had never squandered what assets he could use to his advantage.

When the door to his cell slid open, he stared wide-eyed in surprise as Petrova stood awkwardly in the doorway.

*Where is my mother?* he almost asked. "Where is the General?"

Petrova shook his head. "Not today, kid. It's been cancelled."

Kylo's eyes flickered to the light dimly blinking behind the black-tinted dome imbedded into his cell wall before raising a brow as he watched his defense slowly make his way to the cot and sink down onto it- the only place to sit.

"Or rather 'rescheduled'," he continued with a twinge of bitterness in his voice.

"I wish you wouldn't call me that," he said flatly.

Petrova ignored his complaint and Kylo's grip tightened around his comb. Silence ensued and the older man's eyes glanced to the side at his client's increasingly strained fist and stared impassively.

"Y'know, if you break that, I'm not so sure they'll give you another one."

"What do you want?" he asked bluntly. Kylo could feel his teeth grind into each other when the man just sagged his shoulders and said nothing. "If there is nothing today, then why are you here and what do you want?" he repeated, biting at the words as they came out.

Petrova set his arms on his knees as he hung his head slightly before turning to look at Kylo. "You ever gonna stop fighting me, kid?"

Kylo's eyes flared. "I told you not to—"

"I know what you said," he interrupted, holding up a placating hand as Kylo strode a step forward. His steps were long, Petrova noted. Silently he calculated he had about a step and a half further before he made it within reach of him. He rolled his tongue between his teeth considering his odds. He hadn't seen Kylo inside of his cell since the first time, instead deciding circumstances were better when they met before and after council sessions. He didn't know why Kylo responded better in those instances. Maybe it was something about being trapped in a jail cell that set him off.

Kylo arched a brow. Petrova sighed.

"Since we had so much extra time today," he began, "I wanted to check in about that thing we talked about earlier. About whether or not you recognized anybody else on base who you might've known before who might be willing, under the right circumstances, to speak a little on your behalf during the trial."

Kylo's shoulders relaxed and he grunted, his grip slackening.

"No," he said quietly with a shake of his head.

Petrova waited, hoping for a bit more. "No….what? No you don't recognize anybody, or no they won't speak for you?"

"I know they won't speak."
"You 'know' this, or you asked them and they said no? There's a big difference, you know."

Kylo's mouth pressed into a thin line. "They won't speak, alright?"

His voice reverberated in the small room as he lashed out, and there was silence as his defense took in a steady breath.

"Alright," he conceded. He bobbed his head and, cautiously, stole a glance at the half-fuming man in front of him. *I shouldn't ask*, he thought. *I shouldn't. Should I? I really shouldn't.*

"What about Rey?" he asked finally.

Kylo froze, his gaze large and sharp as his fist tightened again, the points of the comb digging hard into his fingers. The pain seemed to keep his mind clear.

"Did you try asking her?" he asked again. "She seems like a reasonable girl," he added plaintively. "Reasonable," Kylo repeated, jerking back his head. "Yes, but you will leave her out of it."

Petrova sighed in exasperation. "Listen, Kylo—"

"No," he half shouted, pointing the plastic object at him. "*You* listen," he sneered. "You will leave her be- she will have no part in this."

"But—"

"There is nothing she can say that could change their minds!"

Kylo's eyes narrowed as he suddenly saw each of those slithering members of the 'council' there before him and remembered how loudly their thoughts had rung out. *Guilty Guilty Guilty*—nothing anyone said to them could save him. He lowered his arm as Petrova sat looking defeated on his cot and he adjusted his grip on his comb to something a little less prickly.

"It would only harm her….speaking for me. Best to leave it."

Kylo turned his head to the side as his lip curled at the futility of it all. Slowly, Petrova nodded.

"I…see where you're coming from," he admitted. "Alright. If you don't want to push it with her, I won't either."

Pushing himself up to his feet, he started to shuffle towards the door.

"But Kylo…think about it, huh? Taking a chance on someone. It can't hurt," he offered. "I know there are still some people hanging around here who remember….who you were before. Believe me when I say it can only help you case, not hurt it. I don't think you can do any more damage to it as it is."

The man gave a small quirk up of his lip before knocking on the door to go, leaving Kylo behind to stand lost in the middle of the room. It might not hurt his case, but he wouldn't give them the satisfaction of begging. Slowly he lifted his head to look up at the tiny black dome and its blinking red light.

"Couldn't come in and admit it to me yourself, huh?" he said to the air. " Couldn't tell me to my face you didn't want to speak for me to begin with?"

His lip twitched with a snicker as he turned heavily towards his cot and ambled over to it, flinging
himself down to sit.

Leia watched from the control room and narrowed her eyes.

*It's not like that*, she whispered to herself. *If only you knew what they were like*, she reasoned, and her face morphed into mild concern. *What am I talking about? Of course you know...so why do you still—*

"General?"

Leia turned towards the gruff voice to see the rough-shaven man sent to argue for her son's life enter through the doorway behind her. She gave him a sad smile.

"No luck?" she asked sympathetically. He shook his head.

"Well..." she continued, turning back to the screen. "Perhaps there's still hope yet."

—

It was just after 21:00 when Rey stepped out of her quarters. Gripping her pillow tightly to her and grateful to be finally remembering it this time- why should they have to rough it on the hard durasteel floor every night?- she punched in the key code to lock her room and started down the familiar passageways towards the prison level. On her way she could hear the revelry echoing from the direction of the hanger.

*I guess the spirits have arrived*, she thought to herself with a pleased smile, and as she turned the corner her boots scooted to a halt as she almost barreled straight into Poe's chest. She let out a small, unflattering squeak before slumping forward with an audible gasp.

"*Oh my—* You two really scared the heck out of me! What are you doing out here? Aren't you supposed to be drinking with the others?" she rambled off as the adrenaline started to drain back out of her, eyeing Finn as well as he emerged beside the pilot's shoulder.

"Rey, we could ask you the same thing," Poe said with a frown. "What are you doing out here?"

Rey gaped for a moment, looking back and forth at each of them before giving her pillow an unconscious squeeze and shutting her mouth. She looked imploringly at Finn.

"I-I told you, I—"

"Rey," Finn said gently. "What's been going on with you? We're worried about you."

Rey sighed as she tilted her head. "You really *don't* have to be worried about me. I'm fine."

"Really?" Finn said with a hurt expression marring his brow. "Where are you going then, Rey? And with that?" he asked, nodding towards her pillow.

"Look," she began, and took in a deep breath as she bowed her head, trying to collect her thoughts. How could she begin to tell them?

"There've been rumors, Rey," Poe said quietly. Her head shot up.

"Rumors?" she shot back. They nodded.

"That is *ridiculous*! What rumors could there possibly be about me?"
"People have seen you sneak off at night," Finn offered, "Never going back to your room. No one sees you till after lights on. They say you've been coming from the prisons, Rey," he pressed, "That you've been…." he swallowed hard as he struggled to get the words out. "That you've been going down to see Kylo Ren."

Rey stared at him in shock before her brain finally sputtered back to life. "Look, all I'm doing is going to sleep, alright?"

"In the prisons? With Kylo?"

"It is not like that!" she scoffed incredulously.

"Then how is it, Rey?" Poe asked calmly with a furrowed brow. Rey struggled to look up at them both, feeling overweighted by all of their assumptions and not knowing where to begin. She brought a hand up to the side of her face to try and steady herself.

"Like I said, all I'm doing is going to sleep."

"and why can't you do that in your own room?" Finn bit back.

Because what? her mind answered silently. Because for once you feel safe? Because you aren't freezing when you sleep next to him? Because somehow you've found peace? Rey squeezed her eyes shut and grunted loudly in frustration.

"Because I cannot sleep!" she shouted in confession. She opened her eyes just enough to glare at them both. They stared at her, and she stared at them, and her face began to soften.

"I cannot sleep," she repeated forlornly. "And he can't sleep either."

Poe's face twisted in confusion. "What?"

Finn quickly shook his head. "Wait, he can't sleep either? What is that supposed to mean?"

Rey sighed in exasperation as she tried to get the words out but Finn continued to cut her off.

"So just because you're having a hard time sleeping you decide to slip down to his prison cell and you two just—"

"SLEEP!" she shouted, eyes bulging at him. "We sleep, Finn! How many times do I have to tell you? How do you think we survived on this wasteland of a planet anyway? By being disagreeable and not interacting with each other whatsoever?" she accused.

"Well that would be preferable!" he shouted back. "And you're not out there anymore, Rey! You've not been out there for weeks! How do you know this isn't some trick, some...some Force thing to manipulate you? You don't know what you're—"

"What? I don't know what?" she seethed. They were silent as they burned holes into each other, until with a loud grunt of frustration she pushed around them and stomped her way down the hall.

"Rey?"

She ignored them.

"Rey?"

She was late, and they had made her later. She grit her teeth as she finally made her way to the
prison and the door slid open for her. Inside was Kylo sitting on his cot, elbows propped on his knees as his hands fell loosely between them, his head bowed and hair falling loosely to hide his face. He was the picture of a man waiting, and something in her fell with guilt.

"I'm sorry!" she said as she breezed into the room. He immediately perked up at the sound of her voice and watched her as she moved with exasperation around his small space.

"I'm sorry, I got caught up and—"

"I was worried you wouldn't come," he said quietly.

Rey frowned and shook her head insistently. "No, no, I just…I ran into Finn and Poe in the passageway and—" his brow quirked up "-and they asked me what I was doing so late out with a pillow in my arms and—"

She sighed for what seemed like the millionth time that night and began to pace. "—and I had to try and explain to them that there was nothing going on, but that we…we had our reasons for spending nights together because neither of us could sleep because of—" she swallowed, stopping short of saying his name out loud. "—but they wouldn't listen, and so I…" she stopped her pacing as the pillow slumped lower in her arms and she stared at him with an imploring look. "…I came as quickly as I could."

He let go a quiet huff as his shoulders relaxed. She wasn't leaving. She was always going to come…

Rising to his feet, he kept his eyes on her loosely-held pillow and ducked down slowly to pull it out from under her grasp.

"Oh…I thought maybe we could use that…" she began, but he remained silent as he turned and placed it on the edge of the spare mattress.

Turning back to her finally, his eyes slowly made their way up her form before resting on her eyes. They seemed sad, confused as they looked at him, and he turned his head slightly to the side as if to ask the reason.

Rey pressed her lips together. "Why are they doing this?" she asked sadly. "They're like children, mad just because I won't go to their silly party and—"

The corner of Kylo's mouth tugged down in suppressed amusement as he listened and Rey narrowed her eyes.

"Are you laughing at me again?" she asked. "I'm trying to share something with you and you're laughing."

Kylo's expression grew wider. "No, never," he said almost in a whisper as his brows flinched briefly together in feigned concern. Rey opened her mouth to counter that transparent claim but as she did so, he turned away and looked up towards a corner of the ceiling. He raised his hand, and with a slight trembling of his fingers, there was a loud POP and Rey flinched.

"What was that?" she asked suddenly, watching him lower his arm as his eyes found hers again. "What did you do?"

Somewhere, the control booth scrambled.

He smiled at her. Not one of those half smirks or coy grins, but a real, genuine smile. It threw her, and she stood there, unable to do anything but bear witness.
"My mother's been watching," he said finally. "And I don't want her to see….I don't want her to
watch us anymore."

Rey's brow creased slightly at his words and her lips began to part as if to speak when his
fingertips brushed against the hair below her ear. A shiver threatened to run through her at the
sudden touch, and in a moment he was hovering over her, his lips a breath away from her own, and
when her eyes looked away to find his, she found him looking back. She met his gaze, and when
she didn't pull away, he closed the space, pressing his lips to hers. Rey felt a surge run through her
as his mouth was warm on hers, and as if on their own, her eyes fell closed. It was a single kiss, but
as it lingered on, his fingers dragging against her skin, she felt a familiar static bleed through her
and, suddenly, into him. Her mind raced as the two energies seemed to mingle and churn and she
leaned into him, closer, as the warmth of his biceps brushed against her arms. She was falling as
the static, the sensation, pulled at her, seemed to draw at her very essence, and it was too much, she
insisted, too much as her mind swam struggling to hold on to itself and hold back.

And like that, they were parted. Slowly she opened her eyes as she struggled to feel as if she wasn’t
really outside of herself, and as she looked at Kylo, his eyes seemed to betray a similar feeling but
with a decidedly more unfamiliar strain. What was this, she wondered? What did he think? She
found herself leaning forward and back into his waiting arms as if in doing so she could find out,
and his fingers dug into her hair as she enveloped his lips with her own. He welcomed her into
himself, felt her unknowingly tug on that cord that bound them, and he let her pull as his teeth
gently pulled and nipped at her lower lip, gasping as the shocking sting from before lanced through
his tongue.

I need her…

He knew she heard it now, his now-familiar mantra, and she didn't run away. He wrapped his arms
around her and pulled her closer as her fingers trailed the sides of his face. She threatened to devour
him, he realized, and in that moment, he almost wanted to beg her to. Seconds, minutes, hours…
nothing existed outside of them until slowly, gently, he pulled away, but not before one last chaste
kiss to the corner of her mouth. He pulled back, and she fell forward, her hands gripping into his
shirt as her head rested against his chest. In the now familiar ritual, he shifted with her in his arms
to take up both the blanket and her pillow as he dropped the latter to the floor and flung out the
former to tuck around her shoulders.

He could feel the exhaustion radiating from her. So tired, he could almost hear as he hushed unsaid
words and brushed stray strands from her face. As they laid down, she pulled the blanket to cover
him with her and, with one last brush of lips, tucked herself close and closed her eyes.

When the cameras came back online, that's how they found them. Leia listened as the techs tried to
explain what caused the blackout, but as she looked at the two figures on the screen, she watched
as his thumb idly caressed the young woman's cheek. She felt her heart constrict. She wanted so
badly to hope, but with no real proof, she tried to hold back.

Chapter End Notes

OH BOY!

So I wanted this chapter to have been out by tuesday but crazy things happened, or
didn't happen (like my x-ray when it was supposed to have happened), and I got
slammed with stupid *shit* and...I hope you all enjoyed it. The chapter title is appropriate on all sorts of levels, haha. We are finally starting to ramp up now. Hang on tightly.

Bless you all for your great responses last chapter. Massive bear hugs to Plato, mweerden, aiCHa77, DalekandtheTARDISat221B, Robyn, missjewels, lolita_iori, Jacnice, Karla_shadow, CharlotteCAgain, trashfan2003, Chai, Starships, Patty, Gummyyummy156, rey肯obi, IsobelBloom, Raxephan, DasFeministMermaid, Ann, Nissian, Sarah_Jo42, All_The_Feels, arw5205, kylling, Nina10, PoorQueequeg, neternefer, Muchadoaboutnada, Jayra177, Just A Human, Anna, Abby, g_girl143, MeowloRen, Palom, sarena, and ivylovesnarry. You guys have kept me grinning all through this crazy week- thank you so much for everything.

Also a very special thanks and welcome to all the new readers who may have found their way over here- I'm delighted to have you aboard this crazy train.

Also also!! "PREY" has a mood board! It served as a good distraction as I tried to get through some story points, but you can find it here: http://these-are-the-first-steps.tumblr.com/post/150001183391/these-are-the-first-steps-prey-hello-yes

It was made with the help of many of you readers who have begun to remember things better than I have- my mind is flung so far into the future of this story that I may have to start relying on you all for past details, haha!

Thank you all so much, and see you next chapter~
Rey found herself to be very warm. She wouldn't call it too warm, but it was very definitely pushing the boundaries. She had slept very deeply and her foggy mind registered that whatever she was sprawled over was both hard and soft and also very uneven. And very familiar. It also brushed at her cheek and forehead and she sighed at the sensation, unconsciously leaning into it slightly until she felt what were very distinctly lips pressed against her hairline and she squirmed. Her eyes cracked open, and as they struggled to make sense of the uncommon dimness, she realized she was entirely under the blanket. When she shifted her head to look up, she saw his head was covered as well. His eyes were closed.

Her mind pulled the events of the night before more closely to her and she really thought she should feel more of something discouraging, but no- he'd kissed her, mid rant and he'd kissed her, and when he pulled away...she'd pulled him back.

She could feel his arm draped almost lazily around her waist, and as she got enough purchase to scoot herself up, she lifted her head to gently brush her lips against the corner of his mouth. She felt a shiver pass through her even though it was impossible to be cold in this poorly constructed blanket fort powered by the human heater beneath her splayed hand and the one leg that had managed to tangle itself with his.

She felt him take in a sudden, deep breath, causing her to shift more to the side, when in an instant he lifted an arm to tent their cover and scooted down till his mouth mirrored where her's had just been on her own cheek until she moved, just slightly, and their lips pressed together and he sighed.

She was much too warm, and she could feel herself melting into him, now, as he traced his tongue along the seam of her mouth until she gave in and her lips covered his. She could feel their connection take hold between them but she ignored it, her still half-asleep brain fully engrossed in the way his tongue moved over her own. His fingers found their way into her disheveled hair, and when they parted, he continued to leave slow, light kisses on either corner of her mouth and along the edge of her lips.

She breathed. She really should have had some complaint, but at the moment, she was coming up blissedly blank. She felt her mind skirt the edges of his, letting her in slightly, and she instead decided to indulge in the feeling this and his lips produced, whatever it was, for as long as she could get away with.

When she finally opened her eyes again, she looked down to see a set to his face she thought she'd only ever see on him in sleep. His brow was smooth, and he looked at her with such a strangely relaxed air that she found herself bringing up her hand to rest against his cheek, to feel it for herself. It was real, the energy under her fingertips told her, and her hand fell to his neck as she tucked herself back against him.

There was silence in that moment- nothing but the soundless buzz against their skin- and as her fingers traced the edge of the neckline of his sleeveless standard-issue, she toyed slightly with the sensation as it prickled at her fingertips.

"What is this?" she murmured softly.
"I don't know," he admitted.

She shifted to look up at him and he glanced back into her shadowed face.

"Does it bother you?" he asked quietly.

Rey gave her head a quick shake. "No."

That silence came back again. They gazed at each other by what little light filtered through their cover and something made her think that maybe...sometimes words weren't necessary. Rey swallowed.

"I have to go soon," she said finally.

"I know."

His leg captured between hers lifted up, pushing her up closer to him and he pulled her with a sigh into his arms.

—

Rey wandered. The halls bustled with activity, smiling faces, people eager to serve and commit to The Cause. Rey felt like that, too. She did. But the universe felt like it was in slow motion when she left the cell block.

Where was she supposed to be again?

She was stopped once or twice by pilots and a few techs, these were friends, and while that seemed to clear the haze filling her mind for the short burst of time it took to engage them in conversation, it quickly clouded over again the moment they left.

Her heart wouldn't stop pounding but at the same time it felt like it was slowing down. Every time she heard her name called out in the canteen as she mechanically ate her pastry and numbly swallowed her caf, every time she tried to find something useful to put herself to in the maintenance bay, she jolted, as if out of a dream, and she didn't know why. It got to the point where by mid day she found herself back in the greenhouse, back in her safe place, and furiously running forms until her arms ached and sweat streamed across her skin.

What was wrong with her?

She slumped down in a heap on the soil-dusty floor and grabbed up her water container, luxuriating in the deep drink of cool water that she could gulp down to her heart's content. As she screwed back on the cap, her breathing began to even out and she looked up at the blurry transparisteel overhead.

She touched her fingers to her lips.

What in the world was wrong? This wasn't her at all.

—

Kylo sat undisturbed after she left, eyes flicking briefly to the base of his cell door for as long as it took for his breakfast to be pushed through it. He'd somehow found his way to his cot and he sat there, back against the cold metal wall, as his eyes stared into nothing.

Rey had been gone, he surmised, for about an hour and a half and he was trying to remember, now,
how… And there was also that *hum*. If he thought back hard enough, he imagined he could almost hear it coming, before it had physically manifested, in those days where the only way he could find her was focusing every ounce of his attention on her signature in the Force.

If this was truly the product of a 'Force Bond', it had to be unprecedented.

They couldn't have *all* been like this.

He sighed.

As he went to shift on the thin mattress, his head started to swim before he leaned himself back against the wall for a moment to anchor himself. Her eyes hovering above his, her lips parted for him- it flashed before his eyes for a moment before he hissed and slammed his hand onto the bed, causing its metal frame to squeak pitifully. *No*, he had to clear his mind. It wasn't safe- not during his waking hours. They'd be coming for him soon, and as his gaze casually grazed the chrome frame they darted back quickly and took in a truly confused expression on his face. He looked… pained. But it wasn't quite that- there was something else as well. His face was pinched in something…*else*…and whatever it was….

He took a moment and tried to empty his mind, *pushing out the feel of her fingertips brushing against his neck*, and schooled his face into something so utterly blank he was convinced even Hux would've bought it.

*And that bastard is more cunning than any of these petulent idiots."

He smirked, but was caught off guard when there was a -click- and the door slid open.

"Good morning," the General said in a bafflingly chipper tone.

At the sound of that familiar voice, Kylo unconsciously began to panic. Scenes of the night before cracked open and spilled through his mind to paraded around like a Shaldanian Parade replete with garish lights and plenty of ticker-tape. *NO*. She *couldn't* be allowed to know. To protect himself. To protect *himself*, he repeated.

He shut down instantly, and whatever expression had been on his face melted away leaving a featureless mask in its place. Leia arched her brow slightly at the inexplicable shift and instead looked down at the plate on the floor.

"Didn't eat your breakfast?" she asked.

Kylo successfully managed to fairly carelessly shake his head. "Not hungry."

"You know you should eat," she pushed, nudging the ration tube a bit with her boot.

Kylo looked down at it and twisted his lips. "Does the fact that you're able to actually move it with your foot not convey to you the inedibility of what they give me?"

Leia raised her brows and considered him for a moment. Kylo sat unmoving and his eyes equally met hers. She deflated slightly.

"I suppose we could spare a meat pastry or two in the mornings instead."

"Three."

"Don't push it," she countered with a quirk of her lips, and she fought as it tried desperately to turn
into a smile. "It'd be good, anyway, for you to get some variety in your diet. Although the rations are perfectly nutritionally balanced."

"You talk as if I have some sort of future to actually get acclimated to," he said with a slight frown.

"Don't you?"

….no.

Kylo didn't reply. As he rose from his seat and followed the diminutive woman along the now intimately familiar corridors to the conference hall-turned-courtroom, he put on his new mask-utter blank indifference. He knew his face was naturally a traitor and he would be damned if he showed the Council a single crack in his veneer that they could use against him. This was the face he wore when he entered into the room, and also when he saw his lawyer who looked at him in mild surprise. Kylo scowled miserably at him- at least that was an expression familiar and almost comforting- and Leia sighed as she watched his bulky frame perch moodily on the seat set out for him.

"Looks like he's still gonna be a pain in the ass then," she mumbled to Petrova.

He huffed, the corner of his mouth threatening to quirk upwards despite himself. "On the contrary," he said quietly. "Looks like something may have finally sunk in."

Leia glanced at him in mild surprise, and the session began.

Kylo didn't pay any attention. They seemed to talk for hours and hours- first the various council members, then Petrova, then another council member, then Petrova again. The cycle was sleep-inducing. He tried to think of anything, anything at all- ship schematics, random facts about random planets, historical events, Naboo- anything that would keep his mind off of the girl who tucked herself against his chest at night. He wasn't always successful, and in those moments, he would visibly wince before squashing the images down again. The Council thought he was reacting to the trial. Incredibly naïve.

"…..encampment."

Kylo perked up.

"Our next meeting will be in the small gathering space to discuss our collected intel on this development and determine whether or not these are native inhabitants, random mercenaries, or something…more."

A few eyes glanced towards Kylo's way and he slightly lifted a brow. He looked at each of them and pushed, as lightly as he could manage, at the fringes of their minds. The strain of being delicate caused his mouth to twitch until all the pieces snapped into place to create a picture of the random settlement that Rey had told him about earlier. Was it First Order? They seemed rather desperate to know- the defense coordinator was positively reeking with anxiety.

Not a single one of them thought to ask him about it.

This irked him. When he pressed further, he found that it was because they felt he wouldn't tell them anyway. He pulled away from the person he discovered this from when they began to look pained and squirmed in their seat. This was too rich. They interrogate, badger, and annoy him for weeks- subjecting him to one of the biggest farces he's ever been forced to tolerate thus far in his life in the form of a trial that never meant to do anything other than damn him- and they wouldn't even bother using the biggest First Order collateral they had? What a waste. No wonder the
Resistance was clearly in shambles.

Just as Ematt was about to conclude his informational spiel, Kylo butted in.

"What about me?" he interrupted, his deeper voice filling the space.

Silence. The entire room stared at him instantly with a strange mix of affront and fear. He ignored them.

"Why don't you ask me? About the camp?"

There was a pause before a woman with red hair spoke up.

"You would tell us?" she asked incredulously. "Willingly give us information?"

Kylo held back a scoff and his face twitched. Looking around the room, he rolled his jaw slightly before looking squarely at the woman, his fists tightening against his restraints.

"The First Order…" he began strongly, "…they have a bounty on my head. I've already…dealt with several unfortunate opportunists who would've gladly taken it."

The words still tasted bitter in his mouth, his lips twisted into marked displeasure. And then he took a breath, closing his eyes. He felt her there. He looked at them again squarely and then leaned back against his chair. The chains attached to his wrists went slack with a jangle as he slid down the seat in a lazy, careless posture.

"Resistance…First order." He shrugged arrogantly, turning his head from side to side. "I'm dead either way. What difference does it make?"

Low murmurs broke out in small pockets, but mostly the majority stared at him in studied contemplation. He rolled his eyes and let his head fall back.

Leia sighed heavily and looked at Ematt. It wasn't a very satisfying answer, she knew, but still…Ematt looked back and she pursed her lips. He nodded. Turning back to Kylo Ren who was now splayed atop his provided seat rather than properly sitting in it, he frowned.

"What do you know?" he asked, silencing the other voices in the room.

Kylo's head darted forward, and as he worked to push himself back up to something resembling a proper sitting position, he looked Ematt in the eye and smirked.

—

Darkness had long fallen over the planet but still Rey swung her saber, the blue light steady as it dimly illuminated her immediate area. She never practiced in the dark, and used the opportunity as good practice to reach out and feel with the Force- mostly to make sure she wouldn't accidentally destroy anything.

She'd been worried that someone would come looking for her. Like last time. She knew how engrossed she could be when she practiced- what if someone had come in spying on her without her knowing? No- she'd have known.

She was totally alone. But that's why she came here, right? To be left alone?

No matter how many times she sliced and stabbed the air around her, no answers came. She wanted to be alone, to figure it out. But it was….lonely. She felt lonely. It was a perfect
contradiction.

Rey growled angrily, flicked off her saber, and tossed it onto the rubbery floor, leaving her draped perfectly in night. Her breathing was heavy as she stared into nothing. No, no answers had come. Why hadn't anyone come looking for her? She thought back to Finn and Poe the day before and the fight they'd had. The dialogue filled her mind again and she was reminded of 'rumors' and accusations and other terrible things. Did they really think she'd betray the Resistance? And the rumors….she'd have to be more careful. Clearly no one on the base understood. She knew she was relatively simple in the ways she thought- raising oneself on a harsh desert world scrapping and fighting to get by taught you what was actually important in life: Food, shelter, water. That's it. She loved things like friendship, and blooming things, and….

She pursed her lips and turned to look at the clock glowing above the exit door. Dinner was nearly over.

The people on the base may have been more complex in their machinations than her, but she knew what she was about. She may have...yes, she kissed him, rather a lot, but that still didn't mean anything truly nefarious was going on. She huffed, and called her lightsaber to her hand. It thwacked her finger as it did so, her accuracy thrown off slightly by the darkness, and she hissed. She should practice more at night.

Rey thumbed on the weapon and held it vertically before her face. She let herself bathe in its blue light and gazed into it. She thought about his lips falling over hers that morning and a warm feeling spread through her. It was...soft. She'd always been afraid of the 'soft' feelings before. Usually, she hadn't the luxury for them.

'That lightsaber....it belongs to me.'

Rey looked the lightsaber over. It had belonged to Luke Skywalker. And his father before him, Maz had said. But had it been his also? She'd have to ask someday...

The clock was still ticking, and if she wanted to eat, she needed to do it fast. She used her saber to light her way to the door before turning it off and passing into the corridor towards the canteen. She had to be fast. It was almost time to go down. Her muscles ached as she walked, passing no one on her way.

The canteen was sparsely populated by other stragglers like herself and she ate quickly, stuffing a few things into her mouth before turning back towards the door, the saber bobbing against her thigh.

Her adrenaline was surging and she didn't quite know why. Alright, so they'd kissed, and his hands had held her. But his hands had done that before- in the wastes, and when she'd come screaming into his cell. But this had been soft. That word again. Would things be different now? Were they different? Would he hold her again like he did that morning or would it go back to how it'd been all the days before? Something in her chest pulled at the thought of that softness somehow going away again and she none-too-gently slammed her saber onto the guard's desk, prompting him to wordlessly jump to open the door for her.

A part of her wanted to find out, if he'd be different or the same. Which would she want to see on the other side of that door? Her face was a picture of nervous blankness as the door finally opened all the way and there he stood, wide-eyed and staring at her as her own eyes blinked owlishly as she stepped inside. She walked up to him, and went to raise her hands, to maybe rest them on his chest- she didn't know- when suddenly he gripped her by her upper arms and bared his teeth, nearly snarling as he pushed her bodily with him back towards the exit. She did grip the front of his shirt
when he moved her, and then suddenly his chin was over her shoulder as he shouted at the startled guards behind her.

"Lights off!" he barked. "Now!"

"But—" one unfortunate guard tried to reply.

"I said NOW!"

They shrank as he glared at them and the door began to close again—protection from the madman—but in a moment the lights clicked off and a stunned Rey found the pressure around her arms lessen as he let her go, instead yanking her by the hand behind him as he stomped over to his meager bed to snatch —that damned—blanket off the mattress before

shaking it out aggressively before swooping around to pull down Rey to the floor, the both of them beneath it, as he caged her from above.

Oh, Rey thought, there's no way this doesn't look suspicious, she mused idly before a heat flushed through her and his mouth came roughly down onto hers. He was consuming her, and all she could do was breath and make sure her heart kept beating, until his thumb brushed against her cheek as her mouth opened fully to his and her brain caught up and she wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing him harder down against her. Her fingers found their way into his hair as she chased his lips with her own.

Maybe I am a traitor.

Chapter End Notes

My excuses are poor, but they are a mix of motivation murdered by my job, my job being awful, and a few other things. I can't even remember anymore. But I've decided to turn the recent election misery to good use. It's shorter, this chapter, but next chapter should make up for it.

Guys, I can't tell you how much it means that you've stuck with me this far. Last chapter had a record number of comments and I can't thank Theauthorformallyknownashobbitbabe, Robyn, DasFeministMermaid, AzAngel11, IsobelBloom, Starships, Raxephan, Chai, mweerden, neternefer, Palom, Avdal, PoorQueequeg, Ann, Jacnice, Karla_shadow, Nina10, CharlotteCAgain, Courtney, asfiksija, The_Dark_Becomes_You, bluetoast, Jayra177, All_The_Feels, arw5205, LindseyintheSkywithDiamonds, Olivia_Mockingbird, g_girl143, goddessfreyja, Just A Human, Eroica, KarmaDash_is_ReyloTrash, SheWearsBlackNClear, Anna, lolita_iari, Muchadoaboutnada, Sarah_Jo42, 13oct, IshaRen, SoulMuffin, kylojen, RensGirl, éphémère, Allison, Ellensama, Patricia Reis, bloodysirebond, DalekandtheTARDISat221B, MeowoLOren, michete13, snikr11, laniemarie, Briana, Pugs_Kisses, and AshyWanKenobi for your support and most of all PATIENCE!!!

We've also got some incredible fan art:

From Cheesytriangle who did some unhinged Kylos from his tavern brawl:
http://these-are-the-first-steps.tumblr.com/post/151680132441/cheesytriangle-unhinged-kylos-from
From Gwendy who did a lovely poster for their first kiss! http://gwendy85.tumblr.com/tagged/prey

And purplepegasus1984 made a soundtrack to the fic! http://these-are-the-first-steps.tumblr.com/post/150542429986/purplepegasus1984-playlist-i-made-for

So all of you are incredible and I deserve none of this, especially after this stupid long delay, but I'm excited for the next chapter because [REDACTED] and I really hope you'll all look forward to it- hopefully within the next week or two. x.x

Thanks so much to all of you. I mean that.
Rey didn't quite recall when she had fallen asleep. She just remembered her arms lazily flung around his neck as his lips pulled gently at hers in small kisses until his nose nudged her cheek. "It's alright….you can sleep, if you want," he murmured into her ear.

She had smiled. "No, no…"

Her mind half asleep, she was already somewhat caught in a dream of thick vegetation and stately trees that towered overhead. It was a little humid in this place, but she liked it. And she felt Kylo there. Her grip on him tightened.

"Don't leave me behind," she mumbled. "I want us to go together…"

She didn't see as he looked down at her curiously, a small smile quirking the corner of his mouth as he watched her eyes darting behind her eyelids, her hands spreading against his shoulderblades. He considered the picture she made, and then leaned in closer until his face ghosted just above hers. His head tilted slightly, and his eyes took in her wistful features.

What does she see…?

He knew he could nudge, slip into her thoughts, but he didn't want to- instead choosing to gaze at her in silence as her lip quivered in sleep.

"Alright, Rey," he answered her quietly. "Wherever you are, we can go together."

He moved down further and brushed his lips against the peak of her cheek. Leaning his weight to one arm, he carefully detangled her limbs from around his neck and slid down beside her. Finally settled, he pulled her close and closed his eyes.

'Soft…' the word echoed in his head. His lip curled slightly as he rested his chin against her hair.

Maybe, he admitted with a sigh. Things were quiet here. No whispers. No scalding in his veins. If this is what that was, then he'd take it.

—

Rey felt him heavy across her torso, his head on her chest nuzzled against her neck. She almost wasn't able to get away (either because she didn't want to or he didn't want to let her she wasn't completely sure), but her last glance at him as the door fully opened had her leaning towards him, tempting her towards terribly domestic urges.

Her eyes glanced at the round black glass at the top of the room, however, and when she looked back at him, his eyes were narrowed.
"Go," he said. She sighed.

He stepped back towards the cot. "I'll be here," he continued.

Rey gave him a small smile before nodding and quickly ducking out the door.

Her stomach was growling, chiding her for neglecting it the night before when it only had a handful of rolls to feed off of.

"When did you get so greedy?" she asked it absently, scratching across it. "I'm spoiling you."

She gave a small laugh- it was a ridiculous conversation, but her mood was light and she felt warm and wanted to indulge in it a little.

Rey deviated from her usual fare of a pastry and instead loaded up on a slice of grilled protein wedged in a flaky roll. She grabbed a glass of juice as well before finally taking up her customary cup of sweetened caf as well. She was seated and taking her first bite when a shadow crossed her table and the familiar figures of Finn and Poe sat wordlessly across from her.

Rey chewed slowly, looking from one to the other as they sheepishly dug into their food in silence. Her brow flickered and she resumed chewing at her normal pace before swallowing and washing it down with a swig of juice.

"Good morning," she offered.

Finn's brows shot up. "Good morning!" he replied animatedly.

Poe smiled at her softly. "How you been, Rey?"

Rey took another bite and nodded. "Good. Very good. And you?" she asked, looking at the both of them.

The two men looked at each other and nodded. "We're good," Finn said with a grin.

Rey smiled back. "I'm glad to hear it."

With the conversation at a dead end, they ate on in silence for several seconds before Finn put down his utensils seeming about ready to burst.

"Rey, listen, I'm sorry. We're sorry. About the other day? We didn't mean..." he paused, trying to find the right words. "We weren't trying to accuse you of anything. I realize we won't always understand what's going on with you because of your training and all that, but we were just worried. I mean he crash landed your plane, Rey! He chased you off of Ahch-To! He's been trying to kill Luke Skywalker!"

Rey took in this jumbled apology before quickly shaking her head. "No," she interrupted between chews. "He never said anything about killing Master Luke, just finding him," she corrected casually, stuffing another bite of sandwich in her mouth.

Finn stared at her blankly. "Ok. So maybe he didn't say 'kill'. But do you see what I'm getting at here, Rey? We were—"

"Concerned," she finished for him. "I get it."

Poe sighed. "What Finn is trying to say here, Rey, is that we're sorry. We never should have accused you of...well, literally getting into bed with the enemy."
Rey blinked at him. "But I am."

Poe's eyes got wide and he shook his head. "No, I mean, it's a figure of speech."

"No, but we are technically sleeping, like I told you," she replied, scooping up a stray bit of biscuit and popping it into her mouth.

Poe's expression was growing frantic as he glanced around the room nervously. "No, Rey, that's not what I'm—"

Rey stifled a laugh as she chewed, staring with mirth at her breakfast plate as the pilot tried to awkwardly explain himself. Finally she heard him sigh and his hands flop onto the table.

"You're messing with us, aren't you?"

Rey glanced up and couldn't help the smile tugging at her mouth. She started picking up stray crumbs with her finger as Poe elbowed Finn in the side looking at him incredulously.

"Can you believe this kid? She's totally pulling us along!"

Rey shook her head. "I'm doing no such thing! I'm just a simple scavenger from Jakku."

Poe laughed. "You are no such thing!"

Rey giggled as she licked the last morsels off her finger, stacked her plates, and rose to her feet. As Poe watched her airy mood, a thought dawned on him that made him pause. He considered her carefully.

"You're happy," he said suddenly.

Rey paused and glanced up at him before slowly beginning to nod. "Yeah. I guess I am."

His mouth opened slightly in amused wonder. "Are you sleeping with him?!"

Rey snorted loudly, and then shoved her plates roughly in Poe's direction. "For that you get to take my plates."

As she rounded the table, she patted Finn, who had been watching the entire scene in mild confusion, on the back. "See you two later!"

Poe stared wide-eyed, half-open smirk still plastered on his face as he stared down at the pile of dishes in front of him. Finn smacked him in the arm.

"What was that all about? We were supposed to be apologizing to her, not pissing her off more!"

Poe just shook his head, gaze fixed. "She didn't say no," he murmured.

"What?"

"She didn't say no," he repeated, turning to look at his friend. Finn pulled back in mild surprise before a frown clouded his eyes.

Poe gave a small, faltering smile. "I think we may be in for some trouble."
"No, unacceptable," the woman who wished she were head of the committee, Kylo noted, complained loudly from her seat just behind Ematt.

"Kylo Ren," another man, worthless, enunciated. "You will use some common sense before addressing this Jury. Petrova, get your client under control!"

Kylo's brow flickered at the word 'jury' and Petrova stood there with a sigh. He'd given up ten minutes ago trying to stop Kylo from whatever he thought he was doing. Kylo had been released from his seat and stood, hands still cuffed, to address those assembled. Teeth clenched, he was borderline snarling as Leia sat amongst them, head in her hands and looking exhausted.

"Why not?" he growled out for what felt like the tenth time that day.

"We've already told you!"

His eyes widened with livid ferocity. "No! You've said nothing! Nothing that makes any strategic sense!" he shouted, chains rattling.

Both the committee members and his defense fell back in exasperated defeat. Ematt sighed heavily, glancing at the looming man with white-knuckled fists in front of him glaring with intent at each and every last one of them. He slowly retook his seat, his back thudding against the support.

Ematt wearily waved his hand. "Sit…sit down, Kylo," he said softly, "Please."

—

Rey passed through the main artery of the base, returning to the hanger after volunteering to do some basic repairs on a control panel next to command. When she got half way across, she saw people stopped and standing, staring at a set of double doors as loud shouting bled out and into the open space.

Rey frowned, her steps shuffling to a stop. "Kylo?" she whispered quietly.

She took one step towards it. And then another.

—

Kylo perched at the edge of his seat, refusing to sit back against it completely. He would give them no excuse to chain him to it again. The balls of his feet pressed one in front of the other into the floor, looking ready to spring at any given moment.

"Kylo…" Ematt began, "You have to understand our position."

As he opened his mouth to speak again, there was a rattling at the front of the room when the door swung open and Rey stepped cautiously inside.

"Kylo-?" she asked carefully, and stopped dead when she saw all attention shift to her. Rey's eyes grew wide and her entire body seemed to freeze in the sudden spotlight. This wasn't the right room. This wasn't the right room at all.

"Rey?" came a voice. It sounded a thousand lightyears away as she gaped openly.

"Rey."

Her gaze shifted to see Kylo turned in his seat towards her, a look of confusion and shock on his face at her sudden entrance before he fought it down and swallowed hard. She looked down and
saw the cuffs around his wrists and her face slowly creased into hurt. It had been weeks since she'd seen him in cuffs. She'd almost forgotten that he'd...She'd almost forgotten.

"Rey of Jakku," one of the members began. "This is a confidential proceeding. You cannot be here."

Rey floundered slightly, drawn by the sight of Kylo, when Leia's presence caught her eye.

"Umm..." she mumbled, her mouth opening and closing uselessly.

Kylo ducked slightly to recapture her attention and went to stand when two pairs of hands roughly pulled him back down into the chair. Kylo grunted, grinding his teeth, as a mixture of frustration and just a twinge of shame he refused to acknowledge pulsed through him.

Ematt observed them then, watched as Rey stood there lost, her face marred with concern. Kylo tried to slowly twist out of the guards' grasp while snatching glances at her. She almost looked torn, and he...he almost looked worried.

"Let him up," Ematt said suddenly. A ripple passed through the assembly as the guards, looking questioningly out at their leaders, reluctantly stepped away.

Leia peered over at Ematt, staring hard as she pursed her lips. Ematt stared back with a wince as she subtly arched a brow at him. He bit the inside of his cheek before letting out a puff of breath. Kylo stood.

"And remove the cuffs," he added.

Murmurs of protest sprang up from the committee and Ematt reached up to rub at his forehead in distraction. "Kylo Ren, you have 30 seconds to speak to Rey before your cuffs are put back on and she is escorted out. Is that understood?"

A guard came forward as he held out his hands and he rubbed gratefully at his wrists when they were freed.

"Understood," he replied, looking at Rey. Somewhere in the background the old man nodded.

Kylo stepped towards her. She hadn't moved, still silent in the open space, still an intruder.

"Rey," he said softly, touching briefly at her arm.

The contact seemed to rouse her, and she shook her head lightly. "Is this the trial?" she whispered.

He nodded. "Yes."

Rey looked around at everyone gathered and saw a couple of familiar faces, and many she'd never seen before. Her face paled slightly when she realized they were all staring with undisguised interest at her.

Kylo shook his head and shifted to stand further in front of her, his form blocking most of them from view. "Don't look at them," he said softly.

He was a good shield, Rey concluded, and she looked up into his eyes. "They still cuff you?"

He nodded. "Yes."

She shook her head. "Why—"
"Rey, why are you here?" he interrupted, keeping his voice low.

Rey blinked at him, trying to pull her thoughts back towards her. "I…I heard shouting, and…and I heard you, and I thought…"

Kylo gave her a small smile and brought his fingertips to lightly rest again on her upper arm. "Alright," he said softly. "It's alright, Rey. But you shouldn't be here. You should go."

Her eyes hardened. "Why are they staring?" she asked with a slight nervous edge to her voice.

"Because they are judges. They are judging and they are here to judge."

Rey's face morphed into slight confusion before a slow horror took over. "Are they judging me as well then?"

"No," he said firmly. He tried to reassure her. "No, but you need to go. You have to go, Rey."

The pressure on arm increased from his fingers and she found it oddly comforting. There was a cool sensation and suddenly everything seemed lighter, less overwhelming, and she took a breath. Rey tilted her head.

"Are you trying to help me?" she asked incredulously with a suppressed smile.

"Never," he assured her with feigned shock, and Rey grinned. "Go," he repeated, pushing her slightly towards the door.

"Because I don't need your help to leave a room, Kylo Ren," she shot back, perhaps a little louder than she intended, and she ducked her head before giving him a sheepish look. He gave her a small smile as he watched her leave and the door clicked shut.

"No you do not," he said quietly to himself.

Silence reigned behind him, and it took a moment for Kylo to remember they were even there. For a few blessed seconds, the entire pointless 'trial' didn't exist. For a few blessed seconds, Rey had been there.

He stared at the door for one moment longer before letting his expression return to disdainful disinterest and he turned back towards his judge and jury. They sported a whole assortment of expressions, and for the first time during the entirety of this damn thing he didn't want to know what they were thinking. Slowly, he walked back to his chair, took his seat, and held out his wrists. There was a pause where nothing happened, but as the guard finally came forward with the cuffs, Kylo glared at the floor before leveling his gaze at Ematt with a drop of his arrested hands.

Ematt looked away and back down idly at his datapad. "You are…familiar with Rey, are you not?"

Kylo fought to keep his expression neutral. He tilted his head to the side. "Define…'familiar'."

"You kidnapped her, and then fought with her on Starkiller Base."

"Yes."

"You chased her down and forced her ship to crash land onto this planet."

"Technically she invited me."

Ematt arched a brow and, petulantly, Kylo mirrored his expression back in response.
"And yet after all that, just now, she seemed friendly with you," he continued.

Kylo remained silent.

"And you… actually seemed friendly in return."

Don't look away. They'll only see it as weakness. They can't see it as weakness. There can be no weakness…

Ematt sighed. "In fact, you seem to have taken that thirty seconds and shown this committee an aspect of yourself I'm sure most here didn't dream you possessed."

At this he did look away- it was either look away or roll his eyes. And while the latter was tempting, it wouldn't help him get his way.

"You said you wanted proof," Petrova began suddenly. "That he could be trusted with something like this. That he actually still possessed sympathetic qualities. Well, ladies and gentlemen?"

Petrova spread his arms wide before letting them fall with a -pat- to his sides. Ematt resumed rubbing his forehead as he stole glimpses of Leia's penetrating gaze.

"So you argue…" Ematt began, "You truly argue that if we let your client out, if we let Kylo Ren out, to go and confront the suspected First Order-loyal settlement, that he'll actually do what he's tasked to do and then come back? Based on 30 seconds of interaction?"

Around the room people nodded when Leia spoke up. "With all due respect, Major, it's been more than just 30 seconds."

Kylo looked up, eyes wide with tense caution, as he stared at his mother.

'If you say anything, General, these cuffs won't be enough.' he shot at her through the force. Leia winced, waving her hand as if an insect were buzzing around her ear while still keeping her eyes on her audience.

"Kylo Ren, as some of you are already aware, has been allowed controlled visits with Rey."

"Controlled?" he spat incredulously at her in silence.

"Rey has been instrumental in not only helping keep him under control but also pacify him. His… outbursts…have decreased dramatically since he was allowed visits from Rey."

'What are you doing?'

Leia's eyes flared at him. 'Would you shut up and cooperate for once? Please?'

Kylo gaped at her and sat back, stunned. He tried to take in what effect her carefully chosen words had had on the others but he could sense that they still weren't entirely convinced. He was bereft of surprise.

A member of the committee leaned forward to whisper something in Ematt's ear. The two exchanged whispered words before turning back to their prisoner.

"It seems we will consider this proposal again, with the new evidence included, and in three days time will meet to give a final say. Kylo Ren—"

"Three days?" he interrupted in disbelief. He was back poised at the edge of his seat. "By that time
they could scout this base, report to the nearest Destroyer, and have a full contingent here before you're done with this pointless deliberating!"

Kylo felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Petrova standing over him, begging him with his eyes to not screw this up before looking back.

"Everyone, my client's just eager to confront our now mutual enemies- please excuse him. We will take the committee's guidance and see you back here in three days."

There was the scraping of metal as everyone got up from their seats and prepared to leave.

Kylo's head snapped towards his 'defense'.

"Did you plan that?" he gritted out in muted anger.

"Plan what?" Petrova replied tiredly, pulling the strap of his briefcase across his shoulder.

Kylo narrowed his eyes and scowled. The lawyer merely rolled his eyes.

"If you mean Rey then no. I'd ask your mother about that, if anybody, but it has nothing to do with me. Not since you turned me down."

Petrova avoided his client's face- always shifted too much to one emotional extreme or another for his comfort- and motioned to the guards.

"Let's get you back, huh? It'll be dinner soon…"

—

Kylo stared down at a small cake that sat on a plate on the floor of his cell, shoved through the opening at the bottom like all his meals were. He'd already finished his allocated rations out of necessity, but this was new. It reeked of his mother's doing. Was it supposed to be some sort of reward?

He glared at it as if it were to blame and resumed pacing his cell. Would she even come tonight after what happened? He regretted his cooperation with the committee entirely. He thought they would see reason, let them use use him for something they both wanted to see taken out of play. In his spare time, Kylo had been carefully spreading his tendrils of awareness beyond the confines of the base, back out into the wastes. He'd located the encampment after Rey had mentioned them out there- curiosity and boredom getting the better of him- and they reeked, positively reeked, of First Order deceit. With Rey, the both of them had been able to keep themselves under Snoke's radar, but he knew the Supreme Leader get closer eventually.

They weren't an especially strong bunch. Hired thugs paid to do grunt work until anything substantial came up.

No, the committee was useless. Sometimes despotism had its positives.

The door slid open without his notice, and as he turned towards the final -click-, he saw Rey standing there. She smiled at him curiously, almost with a shyness, and it held him in place as he stared at her. His face clouded over, and he made up his mind.

_FINE_.

He stepped over to her slowly until they stood toe to toe and his hands rose up and brushed against
her forearms. His eyes glanced briefly at the outside control panel as the door started to close and a toggle switched without a touch, dousing the small room in darkness.

"Hey…" one of the guards protested in confusion.

"Leave it," Kylo growled as the door finally shut.

It was routine. And as much as Rey had decided when she left Jakku that she hated routine, she liked this: his hand taking her gently with him, the unfurling of their cover, settling down until the heat of his body pressed against hers reminding her of the fiery sun she'd been forged under.

But she could not account for the sudden look in his eye and the unhurried way he timidly ran a few fingers through her hair, or the way he slowly, almost painfully so, pressed his lips against hers. She went to inhale him, and in that moment his tongue found hers. Part of her wanted the frenzied, hasty pace they'd had before, but he wouldn't let her, holding her arms between them so only his hands could rove. His fingers glided beneath her shirt and against the skin of her back. His touch was scalding. His mouth pulled languidly at hers, the measured pace of it almost too much to bear, and she arched against him, choking off a sound as it tried to escape from her throat. No- they couldn't let anyone hear.

She felt her head press back further into the pillow as he settled over her, and he let her hands go free to weave themselves into his hair. She felt a slow burn fill her and the sensation almost made her cry. She gazed up into his eyes and found him already looking at her. They paused, staring. His eyes….there was something in his eyes…

She leaned up then, recapturing the attentions of his mouth and pulled him closer. It was some time until the physical, and mental, exhaustion of her day started to catch up with her it seemed, and in time she felt a strong temptation to drift off tugging at her mind. She could still feel his lips against her throat now, and he was whispering something she couldn't quite make out. She fell into sleep then, wrapped in the all-consuming warmth. It took her away, and she gave in easily.

Rey awoke in the morning to a facefull of light, the cover tucked around her. She pulled a hand free to shield her eyes from the bright onslaught and tried to focus. It was late. How did it get so late?

She looked around herself.

"Kylo?" she croaked, her voice marred from sleep.

She turned to see the cell door open, and for a moment Rey couldn't quite comprehend what she was looking at. Why was it open? Head shifting to the side, the space beside her was empty and her mouth ran dry. She wasn't drowsy anymore.

"Kylo?" she called again more insistently, flying up to her feet, flinging the blanket to the ground. She turned in the cell, as if looking at every inch of it could reveal to her what she wasn't seeing, what she desperately wanted to see. When it failed, she jolted for the open entrance and found the guard post empty.

"Hello?" she half-shouted in panic, her voice echoing off the durasteel walls.

She bolted down the hall, up the winding ramps that would take her to higher levels. She met no one, and a pit of dread coalesced in her stomach, overwhelming her. As she neared the main atrium, she saw one or two people racing down the hall. They all seemed to be headed the same way.
"Excuse me, but—"

She sighed in exasperation as not a one stopped for her. She found her way to her quarters, shakily pressed her hand against the reader, and quickly changed. When she stepped out again, she saw another person running in the direction of the landing bay. The moment she saw him, she chased after him, keeping up with his pace until the dull roar of voices grew louder and they came out at the main hanger. The entire base had turned out. Caluan Ematt was trying to gain the attention of the gathered masses.

"All of you, please!" the Major shouted, attempting some control.

Rey was lost in the sea of people, her brain incapable of registering any of the snippets of conversation that passed by her. As everyone finally began to settle, Major Ematt stepped forward again, clearing his throat.

"As most of you know by now, we have had a prison break," he began. "Kylo Ren—"

Bursts of chatter rose up again at the sound of his name and Rey felt as if her throat was closing.

"Kylo Ren," he started again, "has breached the base. We do not yet know where he is headed, however that is quickly being examined."

No, no, she couldn't breathe. She couldn't breathe.

"Did he steal a ship?" someone shouted above the din.

Ematt slowly shook his head as Leia pushed up to the front.

"We believe he has left to confront a First Order scouting party at the edge of our outer perimeter. This party threatens to discover our base, and it was proposed that after their intentions are discovered that he will return."

"So this was planned?"

Leia shook her head in exasperation. "No, of course not, but—"

Someone from the back, someone Rey vaguely recalled from the day before, sneered from behind the General, robes billowing. "You honestly think, General Organa, that this is anything other than a ploy to return to the First Order with the information he's gathered from existing in our brig, being given a trial he did not deserve, when he should have just been shot on sight?!" they screamed.

Leia's eyes flared at the speaker and Rey could feel as her fingers closed around her neck. No, this couldn't be happening. A search party loyal to the Order? How—oh, but her memory was helpful in reminding her.

"There seems to be readings that indicate a camp has formed just outside the monitored perimeter," she'd mentioned casually.

"What kind of camp?"

She'd done this. She…

"Kylo Ren has no more reason to return to the First Order than you, or me, or any other sane person in the galaxy. He's been irreversibly marked by them. He's already fought off several
bounty attempts—" Leia insisted.

"And that's what he told you!" someone fired back.

"He will be back!" she insisted.

Rey couldn't stay here. She had to go, when a hand closed around her arm and she jumped with a muffled scream.

"Rey!" Finn's familiar face swam into view and she nearly melted onto the floor in relief, a large sigh escaping her chest as she reached for him to steady her. Poe bounded up behind him, the gravity of the situation perfectly etched onto his face.

"Rey, we were so afraid!" he said with a hiss, pulling her closer.

"What?" she asked lamely.

"We thought…" he swallowed. "We couldn't find you. And we thought maybe…maybe you'd gone with him."

"What?" she panted.

Her hand clutched her chest as she felt it start to constrict. This was too much. He was gone. Her friends…they didn't…he had left and gone back to the First Order.

This was bad.

This was bad.

Chapter End Notes

Yeesh, god, bridge chapters are the worst, amirite? But to those of you who mentioned the feeling of 'calm before the storm', kudos to you- how right you were. Battling a bit of melancholy at the moment, but hopefully things will look up.

Other than that, I don't have a ton to say, other than thank you so so much to everyone for still reading this crazy thing. Towards the end of the month I'll have two whole weeks off and to myself, during which I plan to lock myself in a closet in my hometown and write like mad in the blessed silence.

And thanks especially to all you wonderful people who shared their thoughts with me last chapter, Olivia_Mockingbird, Wolvesrogue, Frozenmusings, ReyloRobyn2011, Annikin, missjewels, Muchadaaboutnada, LindseyintheSkywithDiamonds, TheauthorformallyknownasRobbitbabie, SheWearsBlackNColor, Ephemeralxx, lolita_i_ori, Chris Costa, Jacnice, Merkate, arw5205, Raxephon, aICHa77, Karla, IsobelBloom, Avdal, Patty, AkhalOfAzeroth, KarmaDash_is_ReyloTrash, mweerden, Billysmind, Veronica_Sweetheart, bluetoast, AnnisobsessedwithKylo, Katiiedid, 13oct, arena, neternefer, All_The_Feels, trashfan2003, Patricia Reis, PoorQueequeg, Lois, Killertopaz96, Courtney, DasFeministMermaid, SoulnaMuffin, GotMyInvite, Briana, kylling, CharlotteCAgain, Eroica, Chai, AshyWanKenobi, Shwtlee, kylojen, knekiken, MeowloRen, Just A Human, Kieran, and nightangelerik.
You guys make my existence these days- thank you so much for everything.

(PS re the ending: Pls don't kill me)
Chapter Notes

A very short Christmas update because I wanted to get something to you all on Christmas! Hope everyone's had a lovely holiday, whichever one you're partial to, and hope you enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

How could you not know where I was?

I'm where I've always been, ever since I arrived-

Locked up in his cell, in his arms.

Rey felt light-headed. She knew Finn was talking to her again, but she couldn't quite make out the words. She felt another hand at her other elbow and quickly realized that between her two friends, she was being stealthily removed from the assembly.

"Have you eaten?" Poe asked as they set her down in the deserted canteen.

Rey shook her head, and soon a grilled egg and a steaming cup of caf were placed in front of her. She didn't know if she could eat it.

"How did...how did he escape?" she croaked. It felt like such a stupid question to ask, and the word 'escape' tasted bitter in her mouth.

Finn sighed, clearly on edge, as he sat across from her. "We don't know yet. But a few people were found wandering around in an unfinished passageway who couldn't remember how they'd gotten there. And Inventory was a mess. They're trying to clean up in order to figure out what he was looking for."

Rey stared at her egg and picked up a utensil. She prodded it almost absently.

"Do you have any idea what he might've been looking for, Rey?" Poe asked from behind her.

She looked up, having to crane her neck to see him, before giving her head a small shake.

"No," she replied, and turned back towards her food. "No idea."

There was silence as Finn sat, senses on high alert, and Poe stood solemnly. Rey could feel the tumult in both men's minds, Finn's especially. She caught glimpses of his short time on active duty as they lashed out from him, and she could occasionally catch snippets of a red lightsaber, unwieldy in its equally unstable owner's hand. She closed herself off with a squeeze of her eyes and took up her caf, nearly downing the contents in one go.

It felt like a vigil, existing in still silence in the large empty space, when an official Rey barely recognized as another one of the faces she'd seen the day before stepped into the canteen.

"Rey?" he called. Her friends looked up before she did, still lost in blank shock as she watched the
egg yolk run onto her plate.

"What do you need, sir?" Poe answered. Thank the stars for Poe- always prepared in a crisis.

The man's jaw squared as he motioned towards Rey. "She is being summoned. Since she was the…closest to the prisoner- and I hesitate to say that- we need her to look over some things, see if she can provide us with any information."

Finn frowned. "She needs a moment. Give us some time?"

"It can't wait," he replied. "If she doesn't come, I will have to bring her by force. I had wanted to make this clear by coming to you with an official contingent but I…wasn't allowed," he half-sneered at the end, glaring at Rey's hunched form. "She must come now."

Finn fixed the man with a disgusted look and Poe merely sighed. The pilot rested his hands on her shoulders and tried to ignore the way she flinched at his touch, instead choosing to pat her comfortably.

"Alright, sunshine, you're being 'summoned'. Not sure what that means, but I don't think you have a choice. But we'll go with you—"

"No," the man interrupted. "She is being filled in on classified information. You cannot go with her."

Finn scoffed loudly as Rey slowly rose to her feet. Lifting her head, her eyes were rimmed in red as she looked around at her friends.

"It's alright. I'll….I'll be back."

She tried to gift them with a smile, but it was difficult. It seemed to fail on her lips before it had even begun.

—

The questioning had been weak. They were the standard things- did you know? No. Where did he go? I don't know. Did he give any indication he intended to break out?

At that last one, Rey's face finally flinched.

*Did he give any indication he intended to break out?*

All she could see was the shirt covering his chest…

"*Couldn't you just leave? I know you can.*"

…his arms around her…

"*And how do you think that would end, Rey?*

…his hands on her face…

"*And where would I go? Hmm? Tell me.*

….his lips on her lips, and his *eyes*…

*I have nothing, Rey.*
She wanted to cry, and her face gave her away. But somehow, somehow, she managed to grab the feeling, strangle it, and pull it down deep inside her again.

She blinked, re-collecting her thoughts, before looking back at her interrogator. "No. No he did not."

Leia was nowhere to be found.

It was recommended, in her presence as if she weren't even there, that perhaps she should review footage from the trial, that perhaps it would jog some memory. She told them again that she shared with them everything she knew. And she meant it. They had never really discussed anything about the Resistance or anything political. They talked about the Force, about the Jedi, and about all the other factions that existed out there. Yes, they talked about the Sith, she admitted. But he wasn't Sith. He wasn't Sith, she was sure to tell them that. In a moment of plaintive confession, he admitted that it was actually impossible for him to be Sith - that the Light warring inside him was too disruptive for the clarity of mind that the way of the Sith demanded of its adherents.

She did not share with them that, however.

The pressure of the council members present, and her own morbid curiosity, led her to say yes to their recommendation. Yes, she would watch their holos of Kylo's trial. She would watch, and tell them what she could.

She was ushered into a small, solitary room. It contained a portable holo console and a one-way mirror imbedded into the wall. This is a nightmare.

Taking up the lone chair, the door behind her clicked shut - was it locked? - and shortly after, the screen sprung to life. Rey gasped at seeing him again. This was day one, and he sat sprawled in a flimsy chair before the council. His pants didn't fit and he rolled his eyes, all arrogance and swagger. He gave half answers when forced to speak, and Rey watched in pained silence until the Kylo in the holo went dangerously still. His eyes were locked unwavering at something out of frame and suddenly there was a loud clatter and a shout-

"Ben, STOP IT!"

Leia. It was Leia.

Kylo's movements were fluid, predatory. "Who's 'Ben':" he rasped, leering.

He was doing something, Rey was sure of it. He was doing something through the Force against his own mother, and Rey was utterly horrified.

"Tell them!" she watched him scream. "Tell them how you ignored the desperate pleas of a little boy who just wanted the nightmares to stop!"

The worst part perhaps was that she remembered that day, the roiling sick that had overtaken her. Kylo had admitted some time later that he'd not been in the best place that day, and used it as further evidence that they should study together and practice. But that it had been this?

And it happened again and again. Different clips from different times, and it was like looking through a wormhole into another dimension, at another person. She watched as he sneered and took full advantage of the lead on his restraints.

"You have your cameras in my cell, General, why don't you tell me?"
That's right. That tiny black dot at the top of the wall. It was always there, and every night...did they know? Rey's blood ran cold as she watched Kylo tear into his mother, again, over some snippet of their shared past she couldn't begin to understand. She could sense the council's discomfort every time this happened. He was strategic, clearly, in when and how he cut, careful to pick away at her credibility and cast doubt on whether or not she was actually responsible, at least in part, for forging the monster that sat fuming before them.

He was cruel. There was no other word for it. He didn't mention his father often, but when he did, it was precise and never more than he needed to in order to burn her. By the time the screen clicked off and the door opened, leaving her squinting into the light being told she could leave for the day, she felt physically ill. The man she'd just watched for several hours was nothing like the man who stared at her, wide-eyed, as he welcomed her into his space day after day, as if he couldn't quite believe she'd actually come back again. Nothing like the man who took her in his arms when she nearly knocked down his door screaming when Snoke had invaded her mind and helped her to get past it, to solve the problem. Nothing like the man who'd smile that familiar, crooked smile at her and hold onto her at night as if the guards would come in any moment and yank them apart. After what she'd just seen, he seemed expert at shifting his emotions at the drop of a hat.

What was the truth? What was the truth?

As evening descended on the base, Rey realized that for the first time in a solar month she had nowhere to go. No one was waiting for her some many levels below. No one was waiting for her. No one.

Rey didn't eat. She trudged to her quarters and stepped through the door, feeling a tension drain out of her being that she hadn't known was there when the portal hissed shut. It only took a few moments for the tears to come, thick and heavy, as she almost blindly changed her clothing and made her way to her neglected bed. She choked on her sobs as she pulled the blankets up around her and the lights above clicked off.

She nestled down in them, giving in to the exhaustion, but still she shivered. She was freezing. The base was kept at Optimum, but it was the Optimum of sentients used to dwelling in space, and to Rey, space was so cold. She was of the desert, she burned hot. The shivering overcame the tears, and soon she was wiping her face and grasping for her dresser drawers, pulling on more layers before finally climbing back into bed. There was still a tremor in her body, but she tried to focus now. It was nighttime, and she was alone, and she was terrified. She forced her mind to center itself and threw up every barrier she could. She didn't have the luxury of Kylo's mental defenses to rely on anymore. But in all honesty she didn't really need him. They'd worked on this together- she could do what he did now. He'd prepared her for this.....did he know he would leave after all?

A soft whine left her throat as the tears came again and she clutched the blanket in her hands. She was afraid of what waited for her in sleep while knowing it could no longer touch her. But was that really why she was afraid? It would have to do. She refused to admit to anything else.

Chapter End Notes

*Dodges tomatoes* Please don't kill me!! It's short, brutal, but waxes much more poetical, right? (^_^;;;;;)

OH BOY, ok, so *apparently* in my outline I had an extra day wedged into things that
I'd completely forgotten about, and it's the first time where I was genuinely mad at my outline xD But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense, so I apologize for this tiny chapter, because the last one was short, too, but things you guys are gonna like are coming soon, so please hang in there and just trust me a little longer. I'm going to be stuck on a boring road trip tomorrow, so I'll try to get the next chapter written up during that time.

SUPER awesome SPECIAL thank you to all you great people for commenting and chatting to me last chapter!! I love reading all your thoughts and analyses of this story so so much- like, it's what I LIVE for almost?? I love it so much. So thank you to bluetoast, FoxesDance, Karla, ReyloRobyn2011, kylling, KarmaDash_is_ReyloTrash, Ephemeralxx, No_Name_500, FrejaH, zackghg, DasFeministMermaid, jayra177, Frozenmusings, Hormonal_Trashbag, IsobelBloom, AshyWanKenobi, neteurer, loliota_iori, g_girl143, Thelittlescrimshaw, Nina10, mweerden, butterfingers, Kayla, Raxephan, Avdal, Evi, kylojen, Jacnice, Killertopaz96, sarena, PP, Muchadoaboutnada, SoulnaMuffin, arw5205, Kieran, Chris Costa, Billysmind, MeowloRen, CharlotteCAgain, Ilikebubbles, starpiercer, Jessica_M, Narika, Nissian, ohtheuniform, and Patricia Reis-- You guys are all incredible for sticking with this story, and made the last two weeks so much more enjoyable for me. :,)

Finally, we have a VERY LOVELY MOODBOARD made by reylorobin2011 on tumblr for chapter 26, "Traitor", that is absolutely worth looking at and can be found here: http://these-are-the-first-steps.tumblr.com/post/154470839401/reylorobyn2011-i-made-this-for

Thank you so much for that, reylorobin!! <333

Ok guys, see you again very, very soon with the next chapter, alright? And I do mean SOON, so get your comments in asap to make sure you don't miss the comment appreciation train (make me work harder and add more names to the list, dammit!!) and get in your guesses and thoughts about the current chapter and what's to come while you can!! And happy holidays to all!!!
"Holding just to hold on, hoping just to have one more day.  
One day.  
But since you shined a light on -all my hopes- have all gone away.  
Away.  
Collecting your secrets while I sleep,  
tucking them away now nice and neat.  
Shaking like a leaf, you're so afraid  
I might find out what you're made of-  

Ooh, what happened to you?  
Ooh, what happened to you?  
All alone and so afraid  
That nothing ever stays the same, said-  

Ooh, what happened to you?  
Ooh, what happened to you?"  

—Emilie & Ogden

Rey stirred awake, held tightly by something wrapped around her, until, breathing in, she rolled over and her heavy blanket loosened and fell away. She stared up at the ceiling in silence. She'd slept soundly enough, but her body was stiff and she still felt exhausted.

She rolled off her bed and changed her clothes. The eyes that greeted her in the mirror as she washed her face (a new habit she'd come to like) stared back with a hollow gaze.

There was a notice blinking on her holopad when she picked it up. Another summons. And she soon found herself making her way back down to that tiny room with the one-way mirror. She was numb, now, as it flared to life.

A different day. Kylo's clothes fit him better, and his hair…images flashed through her mind of her fingers in that hair and her brow winced as she tried to shove the memories out of her head and follow what was going on in the vid.

The council was having their turn at presenting a particular charge. Mass slaughter of villages seemed to be today's theme. His body was slack in his seat as his head tilted at a slight angle to stare up at the ceiling. He wasn't even listening. He didn't care. She felt herself harden as she watched him more closely, but then…there was that shift of his jaw. His eyes slightly narrowed. Was he listening after all?

Kylo's defense took the stand- a gruff looking older man with a fistful of flimsies instead of using a pad like all the others. Was his name Petrova? Rey had never met him, but she'd seen him that day she accidentally wandered into the meeting hall. He seemed to look at her kindly then- maybe a bit sad. Why? He didn't know her…
Petrova stood up and began to counter the accusations. Just following orders, Undue influence, but one particular point, one that she must've missed while watching Kylo's utter nonchalance, seemed to stand out.

"With regards to that captain, let it be known," Petrova emphasized, "That had Kylo Ren objected to carrying out the execution as ordered in front of General Hux that Snoke would have punished him severely for it. I will remind the council, again," he continued with some irritation, "that the punishments Kylo was subject to would violate every rule of war in every system of the galaxy, and this was his own side! His own side bleeding him dry!" The man paused. He frowned. "Quite literally," he concluded in low tones.

Rey frowned. She glanced back at Kylo whose head was now bowed, veiled by his long hair, but he appeared to be focused on something. Was it Leia again? She wouldn't have been surprised.

_Bleed him dry._

Rey remembered, or rather tried pointedly _not_ to remember but it happened anyway, what it had been like just being briefly _touched_ by Kylo's former mentor and she found herself hugging her arms tightly around herself at the idea of what it would be like to have Snoke _fully_ in her mind _all the time_.

"Kylo…" she whispered quietly as the vid played on.

There was a jumpcut and suddenly Kylo was shown bowed over, arms propped on his legs, head hanging down as loosely as his hands…until they clenched.

"Petrova, enough, we want to hear it from him- did you hear the question addressed to you, Kylo Ren?"

She could see his knuckles whitening and even make out the tense set of his jaw. What were they even asking…

"Have you," the unseen speaker continued, "had any undue influence or control over Rey of Jakku, who has been visiting your cell regularly every night for the past two weeks?"

She was terrified that he appeared close to punching one of the nearby guards despite being cuffed and chained- by the look at him a little thing like that seemed impossible to stop him- but Rey's breath stopped in her throat as she stared wide-eyed in rapt attention at the vid. Suddenly his hands stretched open and he audibly let go his breath.

"How many _times_ are you going to ask this question?" he growled in frustration, his voice taking on an almost desperate pitch and emotional inflection she'd never heard from him before. "How can you _really_—"

"Just answer the question!"

Kylo grew still. The familiar guise of the unmoving, emotionless Kylo Ren slipped back into place and Rey felt her blood run cold at the sight of it. That he would become that for _this_ question, of _all_ questions, was…

"Why," he asked flatly, hair hiding his eyes from view. Another mask. "Even if I did…even if I wanted…" he drawled throatily, leaning back in his seat now and holding his hands between his legs. "to get inside her head, make her mine…" he shrugged. "…there's nothing you could do about it."
A wicked smile crept its way onto his face and Rey felt her world freeze. Another voice. Female.

"Alright, that's enough- Kylo, frankly, stop bullshitting this committee- you couldn't get to Rey if you tried," Leia scoffed. A genuine twist of his lips seemed to transform his smile now as he laughed silently but Rey didn't see it. She was trapped in shock.

"Well then tell them to stop asking me. Stop bringing up Rey. She has nothing to do with this."

Rey pushed away from the console and stood up. The holovid played on as she tugged at the door to the room. Locked. *Fuck them*

Rey tried to slow her breathing in order to focus on the mechanism of the lock, to open it and let her out of this suffocating space that was *killing* her.

"I agree," Leia continued. "Ematt—"

"General," Kylo called, "Kindly make it clear to them in your post hearing meetings, for the *final* time, that Rey is dangerously strong with the Force—"

Rey stopped scratching at the door at the sound of her name in his voice and turned back to look at the screen.

Kylo's face was clear of all malice and he sat like a reasonable being in his seat, suddenly the picture of polite manners. "There is an excellent chance that, with the right training, she could become even more powerful than myself. More powerful than…"

She knew his eyes drifted to Leia now. He opened and shut his mouth as he worked to retool his thoughts.

"She's right. Even if I tried to somehow influence her towards me, the effort would be too great and would take much longer than a handful of weeks." he shook his head before glaring pointedly around the room. "You would do well to give her the credit she deserves and not doubt her. Judging by the farce you put this council and myself through on an almost daily basis you could use all the help you could get, and shunning a powerful Jedi in your midsts is a disgusting waste of resources. Not even *you* would be that stupid."

He snickered and looked away again.

Jedi. He'd called her a Jedi.

But he knew that wasn't the case- he *knew* she hadn't completed her training, and she'd even confessed that she felt she never really truly could become one, and he hadn't even seemed surprised…

Rey's shoulder slumped against the metal door as she took slow, even breaths. He was trying to help her. Calling her Jedi, emphasizing her power- did he *really* think she could become more powerful than him? It was to boost her image in their eyes, stop them from doubting her…maybe spook them enough into not mentioning her anymore.

He was *protecting* her.

Right?

Ohh, she was too easy to give in to these tiny hopes. She couldn't bring herself to give in to the tears that threatened to prickle at her eyes. He had said he *could* use her, *could* manipulate her. This
man talked out of one side of his mouth and then turned and talked out of the other. The frustration that hit her was overwhelming, and whether it was true, not true, lies, danger, protection, she was done. Turning to the door, it flew open and she nearly ran into the girl who had been walking towards it who stared at her with large eyes now as Rey stepped forward with a cold stare.

"I'm finished here," Rey declared flatly, and simply walked away.

Her feet moved of their own volition, taking her steadily…somewhere…until she found herself in the open maw of the maintenance hanger. It had been days since she'd been here, choosing instead to practice sword forms, taking advantage of the advice that Ky—

No.

She strode up to a nearby X-wing and snatched the repair order taped to its nose. Several elements of the engine needed replacing. Excellent. Rey grabbed a pair of gloves and a nearby toolpack and got to work. That's how Finn had found her- torso shoved inside the maintenance space of the ship and streaked with oil.

"Rey," he called. "Rey?"

She pulled herself down and looked out in surprise.

"Hello," she said simply, and hoisted herself back in.

Finn grinned easily but arched a brow as he ducked under the ship to take a better look. He couldn't see anything- she was working too deeply inside the machine.

"Got a lot going on today?"

"Hmm?"

"I thought we could try and catch up some," he continued as Rey lowered herself down again. "Since you're ahh…since you have some free time again," he concluded.

She wiped loose strands of hair from her forehead, leaving a long smudge of grease across her skin as she tried to dust herself down. He smiled as he ambled up to her.

"You know, chit-chat, that thing most people do around here when we aren't fighting for our lives against the Order. You wouldn't be interested in that at all, would you?"

He raised a hand to rub at the mess on her forehead and he tried to ignore the way she flinched before his thumb closed in. He worked to smooth it away but the line just spread wider, making it worse.

"I thought we could spend more time together," he said casually.

He frowned at the smudge he'd made, a bit embarrassed, before giving up with a sheepish smile and wiping his hand on his pants before sticking them in his pockets with a shrug of his shoulders.

"So what do they have you doing? Is the damage control serious?"

Rey sighed as she grabbed up a nearby rag.

"Reviewing trial vids. It's…." She shook her head. "How about you? Have they spoken to you?" she asked as she began to wipe away the grease and oil.
Finn sucked at his lower lip. "No, but I did hear that they finally figured out what was taken from inventory."

At this, Rey perked up. "What did he take?"

Finn became pensive. "Seems it was just his old gear- helmet, old dusty getup…his saber."

They sighed heavily in unison as Rey looked away.

"So nothing really belonging to the Resistance then?"

"It doesn't seem like it….they don't understand why."

Rey felt a dark smirk pulling at her lips. "What would Kylo Ren want with inferior Resistance gear?"

At that, Finn barked out a laugh. "That's true! The First Order is evil to the core, but you can't deny their stuff is cutting edge," he admitted candidly, rubbing the back of his neck. Slowly, his eyes found their way to hers.

"Rey…I know things seem like they're going to hell…but what can I do? How can I be there for you?" he asked plaintively. His eyes settled rather affectionately on her face and she smiled.

"My friend," she said, resting her hand on his shoulder. "Nothing. You don't need to do anything. Just be yourself. It's what I love about you," she said with a grin.

Finn arched a brow as a small smile played on his lips. "Love?" he asked.

She looked back at him holding her smile. "Well yeah," she said with a small shrug. "about all of you."

His brow flinched briefly as he stepped a bit closer to her, resting his hands on her arms. He took in a deep breath. Rey's smile faltered slightly as she peered at him curiously. "Finn?"

Leaning down slowly, almost timidly, his cheek brushed hers as he left a small kiss. Rey froze, tense in his hold. What was he doing? Is this what good friends…

As he pulled back slightly, he looked at her with a seriousness she'd never seen before as she stared back in mild shock. When she didn't move away, he moved closer, but this time she could feel his breath on her face as his lips hovered over hers. Snapping back to the present, her eyes grew wide and she quickly but gently rested her fingers over his mouth with a gentle push.

"I'm…" she began, trying hard to resist the urge to avert her eyes. "Finn, I'm…" she sighed and gave in, looking away. "I'm flattered…moved, even, that you would think of me this way."

He frowned, trying to shake his head but Rey's fingers didn't budge. "Really I am, but…." he shook her head and finally looked up at him with a stricken expression. "I can't….I can't."

She could see his face fall as she dropped her hands away. She tried to give him a heartening smile, and gripped his arm kindly as she moved away, leaving him next to the ship. He didn't call out to her. He didn't say anything. The silence was penetrating. But the feel of his mouth against her hand as she left kept distracting her. She could only think that Finn's lips felt nothing like his. That sensation…that static. It wasn't there. It wasn't there.
By the time Leia found her, she had been sequestered in some obscure part of the base for hours. Night was falling, she knew, but couldn't bring herself to care. She could sleep anywhere, had slept anywhere. She was surprised when the General rounded the tiny offshoot passageway, still rough from unfinished construction.

"So this is where you've been hiding," she said casually with a light smile.

"Oh," Rey muttered in surprise, looking up from the spot on the wall she'd been staring at for who knows how long. "Sorry, do you need me? The base has just been so busy, I'm not really used to it and it got overwhelming so—" she spilled out in a rush.

Leia gave a small laugh and held up a hand. "It's...it's ok, Rey. You're free to go anywhere you like, you know that. But it's been several hours since anyone's seen you..."

Leia's brow arched slightly as Rey deflated, slumping back against the wall behind her. She knows. How can she not know? Wouldn't she be naturally upset, too?

"I just don't understand..." she began, fingering a part of the stone wall that had crumbled to the floor. "I don't understand how he can just go back to them like that. After all that's happened."

Rey chuckled the bit of hardness back at the wall. Leia sighed.

"Well," she said, leaning casually against the wall with one shoulder. "I realize I might be a little bias," she continued with a roll of her eyes and a bob of her head, "But I think he'll come back."

Rey listened without looking, her hand rubbing absently at her mouth as her mind ran through the same circle of arguments it'd been going through all day.

"I think..." the General began again carefully, "between you and me, that whatever he's doing...ultimately it's to protect us. And let me tell you, Rey, it's been a very long time since I've been able to say that," she said with a sad smile.

Rey turned to look at the older woman and her brow furrowed.

"I think he'll be back," Leia repeated almost in a whisper.

Rey's eyes shut tightly as her face flushed on the verge of tears. She swallowed hard. "I want...to believe that. But I've seen so much. Too much to think that it could really be that simple," she finished with a forlorn shake of her head.

"Maybe if he'd stayed with us longer," she tried to rationalize aloud, running a hand through her hair. "Maybe...if he'd been out of a prison cell. Gotten to know everyone," she insisted, looking up at her.

"Maybe it would've been enough to stop him from leaving."

Leia looked sympathetically at the young woman and merely shook her head. "You forget, Rey. Ben grew up in all this. All of these old, grizzled officials you see still hanging around? He already knows them all. I don't think he liked them as a kid, and he definitely doesn't like them as an adult —"

Rey gave a small fluster of laughter and Leia tilted her head in her direction questioningly.

"What?" the General asked.
"He, um," she mumbled, motioning towards her. "He does that, too. Reads everyone's minds before they can finish."

Rey gave a sudden grin as Leia pursed her lips and took in a slightly embarrassed breath. "I… realize it's a little annoying sometimes. It's also a choice," she said pointedly with an arch of her brow. "Somehow your thoughts slipped to me anyway, it seems."

Rey's smile faltered, mind forcibly flashing back to every time she yelled at him in the wastes over the terrible habit, and her face pinched in pain.

"Rey," she began gently. Her voice was soft, Rey thought. Was this what the voice of a mother sounded like? "Rey, I'm worried about you. What can I do to help?"

Rey sniffed back the tears she felt burning around the rims of her eyes and slowly stood up.

"It's alright….really," she insisted, her voice only slightly shaky. "It's alright."

From somewhere deep inside herself she pulled up her best smile and, gripping the older woman's arm with all the affection she could muster, left.

Leia watched her walk down the corridor and around the corner before leaning back against the wall with a heavy sigh.

"I hope so."

—

Rey found herself approaching the prison block. She wasn't sure why she was here. There wasn't anyone there anymore.

The guards didn't seem surprised by her approach- they knew her now. She stood in front of Kylo's cell in silence when one of them timidly turned towards her.

"Um, did you want—?"

Rey nodded, staring at the door ahead of her.

"Right," the guard said. The door slid open.

When she entered the cell, she didn't know, really, what she expected to find there. Should it have been the way it was when she left it? The bunk was pushed back to the center of the wall, and the blanket, no longer on the floor but changed for a new one, sat neatly folded at its end. That it should look so neat, as if he'd never been there…

She cried, and she let gravity take her slowly to the floor when her knees decided they didn't want to hold her up anymore. She sat on the cell floor, and she wept.

—

"General?"

"Yes, what is it?" Leia queried, digging into a late breakfast. She put her daily flimsies aside as one of the officers came through the door.

"Well?" she asked again.
The man cleared his throat. "General, it seems no one's seen Rey this morning."

Leia blinked slowly up at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means they think she's missing, ma'am. We did a quick search before bringing it to your attention, but two of her friends are waiting outside in a bit of a panic."

Leia felt a surge of anxiety spike through her. How had she not seen this coming sooner? Oh Rey was good…

"Let them in," she commanded.

Finn and Poe nearly fell into her office and Leia glared pointedly at them.

"General, we can't find her anywhere," Poe insisted.

Finn looked particularly stricken. "Yeah," he said more levelly than his friend. "We checked all the usual places and then some. A scan of the base also came up negative," he finished, looking down demurely at the floor. Leia narrowed her eyes in suspicion. No, it would have to wait.

"General," Poe began. "Do you think she's….do you think she's gone after Kylo Ren?"

Leia heaved a massive sigh and dropped her spoon onto her plate before slowly rising to her feet. Her petit form still managed to loom over her desk as she planted her fingers squarely on its surface and fixed each of them with her gaze.

"No one, I repeat no one, has permission to leave this base to go after either one of them, is that understood?"

"But General—"

Leia waved a sharply dismissive hand. "No 'But General' s— I forbid it. Rey can take care of herself. Heavens know she grew up on a planet similar to this. She'll survive."

Poe looked defeated and Finn looked…guilty. Leia pursed her lips in contemplation, considering the likelihood of any rebellious behavior.

"I'm serious about those orders, Commander. Finn. No one is to leave this base."

With another heady sigh, she retook her seat.

"Dismissed," she said calmly.

She picked up one of her dailies and passed her eyes over it, trying to at least appear to be getting back to work as the two lingered in her doorway, deciding whether or not to countermand her. After a moment, she heard the door hiss as they left. She felt it, knew they'd listen to her. Unlike her son. Unlike Rey.

"Well," she said quietly, picking up her cup of caf and giving it a swirl. "If there's anyone who can bring him back, it's her," she said to no one, and carefully took a sip.

—

The base was tiny on the horizon as Rey stood in the wastes against the blue of the impending sunrise. She breathed in the dry but still cool air as she watched the color spill back into the sky.
She reached out, and closed her eyes to feel.

'Kylo.'

Chapter End Notes

Welp, they're both out of the base!! 8D

We've lost so much since the last update, though. The heart-to-heart between Rey and Leia originally stopped me from finishing this chapter, but then even earlier in the work I realized that a scene I had planned didn't quite...fit. I tried to shove it in there anyway, but...I'm not perfect. It didn't really have the proper build up to it it deserved but the plot point needed to be made. Oh well.

"PREY" is officially one year old. I never thought it would take that long to finish this story but here we are!

Thanks so much to EVERYONE who took the time out to comment last chapter! It was a more intimate group last time, but I'm so grateful to each and everyone one of you. So, cheers to DasFeministMermaid, ReyloRobyn2011, Sarah_Jo42, CharlotteCAgain, Jacnice, Avdal, aiCHa77, KarmaDash_is_ReyloTrash, Ephemeralxx, Anja08, Raxephan, mweerden, lolita_iori, FrejaH, Billysmind, Nina10, kylojen, Kbourne2012, Emmyjean, Tallergrass, GigiMarie, heidilopez02, jayra177, arw5205, Chris Costa, Karla, kitfisto, Patricia Reis, AshyWanKenobi, Evi, bloodysirebond, Narika, Muchadoaboutnada, Elle, SoulnaMuffin, HB, Direwolves_Unite, and starpiercer.

You guys' comments and kudos really get me through the tough times!! Thanks so much as always for your support.

There is some crazy stuff coming up ahead that I'm really looking forward to, but that needs to be written carefully. I hope I can get it done more quickly at least. My job just literally sucks my soul. It's not ok.

There's been one awesome fan work for "PREY" since last time that I wanted to share!! A lovely cover art piece was submitted by one anonymous soul and can be seen here: http://these-are-the-first-steps.tumblr.com/post/156289494266/good-lord-look-at-this-just-look-at

Thank you so much for this anonymous!

And see you all next chapter!!
"Well you can't save a bad man, nor hear what you want him to say. But you can pray. Well, I am all done prayin’ - I’d rather watch you burn and fade away. Away.

Cover up your eyes now with your hands
Oh my dear, I understand
What I get is never what I see
But don’t trust me and don’t trust—

Ooh, what happened to you?
Ooh, what happened to you?
All alone and so afraid
That nothing ever goes your way, said-

Ooh, what happened to you?
Ooh. What happened to you?
-to you?"

—Emilie & Ogden

Kylo.

Her eyes scrunched tightly against the increasingly bright sunrise as she willed herself to focus, willed herself to hone in on him, and in the back of her mind tried to recall how he'd managed to slip away from her presence unnoticed to begin with.

She was getting nothing. He had pulled away from her. But at the same time...she didn't quite feel like he had.

She opened her eyes wide and took in a gasping breath. They darted along the horizon ahead looking for anything, any hint or clue at all as to which direction he might've taken. The planet's dry, cracked surface gave away nothing, and for the first time in her life Rey would have given anything for sand. She had checked the base's computers before she left, and realized part of the appeal of this place was that it was known for having absolutely nothing. And nothing was exactly what was staring her in the face as the sky changed from green to a deeper blue.

She tried again, determination eating away at her, and this time when she slipped into the Force, she let go of her specific goal and simply floated. That's when she noticed it- some sort of wall. A blockage. A dead-zone in the Force and Rey frowned because that had to be impossible. It was there, just off on the horizon a little to the left, and having no other leads to go on, she set off in that direction.
Rey's clothes had been ruined the last time she was out here. A week in the wastes, rolling in the dust and living off of rations with the enemy after sustaining injuries had left her things unsalvageable. When Rey had hurriedly packed for this little expedition, she was forlorn to discover that nearly all of her loaned standard-issue clothing was black or in some other dark color. It wouldn't do in a place like this. So when her eyes happened across the paper package still sitting half unwrapped on the small table in her quarters, she'd sighed heavily at the prospect. Practicality always won out, and so here she was, the very picture of Rey of Jakku, fitted out in her old tans and wispy fabrics, because she adamantly refused to wear black, of all colors, on a planet like this. She wasn't insane. Like some.

Her tunic was a little tighter on her, she found, since she'd last worn it, and she realized she had much less cord to work with when it came time to tie her trousers. This was a good thing, she told herself. It meant she had food. Although the outfit was soaked in tragic history, sometimes it was good to go back and be able to compare the blessings of the present, she'd decided.

Day one was spent this way, walking, and considering. Letting her mind wander was as good a distraction as any, and every so often she'd stop and feel again towards that anomaly in the Force to stay on track. She let the sun hit her face- kitted out in proper sun screen this time made her fearless as she stomped the barren ground underfoot- and every time her thoughts strayed to him, she tried to push him out.

Distantly, she was distraught.

At the moment, however, she was furious. How could he leave? she asked as she laid into a mercenary band that had caught her off guard during one of her deeper moments of thought. How could he leave me behind? she repeated over and over, and as she dispatched the last attacker and fell upon the group's supplies purely out of habit, she grit her teeth in frustration.

He said one thing, but did another. Did one thing, but said another. He was a walking contradiction, she realized- did he even understand what he was doing?

He was insane.

Why was she even doing this?

No, she wasn't supposed to be thinking about him, she told herself. And when had this planet become so populated, she wondered, as she passed a small band closer to nightfall. Thinking about him made him angry. Being out on this planet made her angry. These sentient beings insisting on fighting her when she told them she wasn't interested in their supplies made her very angry. And her aggression scared her, because at times, it felt just like it did that night on Starkiller Base.

She pressed on as night closed in, and with no obvious cover, and alone, she simply made a quick camp, and tried to settle herself down to sleep.

Day two was much the same, although this time a fellow traveller who was much more eager to talk than to fight explained that she was traveling along something of a trade route. Trade route? The Resistance had no record of that. If she made it back, she should tell the cartographers...

That night, she stared up at the stars. The neighboring gas giant loomed brightly in the sky, and despite its eerie beauty, a hopelessness tugged at Rey so strongly that she quickly covered her mouth with her hand to hold back a sob. She tried to clear her rapidly blurring vision by letting herself fall into the expanse above and letting the starry sky and its planet pull her away as the tears
slipped past her ears. She felt, almost, as if she were floating, and that's when she felt it- a flaring, like the lashing out of a tongue of fire from a star. She gasped and, flinging herself up to sit, tried desperately to clear her mind while also focusing on the sensation and there! She flipped over onto her hands and knees and crawled off of her blanket in the direction it pulled and she strained desperately to see into the dark. There was nothing, but it sang to her, and she listened with rapt attention until, finally, it faded away.

Slowly, without moving her eyes from the direction it had come, she unclipped her saber and held it so the hilt of it faced up in her grip. She carefully traced her eyes down to a patch of ground in front of her and, using the sharp sides of the antique weapon, dug an arrow in the direction she'd felt it call. She didn't know if the dust could get in such a thing. It had survived this long- it probably didn't matter. Rey felt a tiny smattering of guilt, however, when she realized part of her didn't even really care.

Satisfied that her pointer was large and deep enough to survive any kind of meddling in the night, she gave one last glance in the direction it indicated before reattaching her weapon and finally willing herself to sleep.

It was only good for a few hours, and Rey awoke well before dawn. The anticipation was eating at her, even in her sleep, and the sensation won out over the desire to get more rest. The first thing she did when she climbed out of her bedroll was to check for her mark- to make sure it was still there, that it was real, that she had actually felt what she did the night before. She brushed her fingers along the rough trenches she'd dug and looked off towards the dark horizon. She packed up, and before she left, she took her weapon in hand again and dug up the sign- dug around it, too- and patted back down the earth until it was an unrecognizable patch of ground like all the others.

Her heart was pounding when she set off, her pace the fastest yet. At one point, oblivious to everything but the expanse in front of her, she had to stop herself from launching into a run. It would have broken too much of a sweat, and despite her supplies being good, she couldn't bring herself to waste the water.

By midday the sun was scorching. It was a familiar heat, but it had been so long since Rey had been out in it that instinctively she kept an eye out for any sort of cover. There wasn't any, and deviating from her course would mean losing her lead and she couldn't do that. So she bore it, even though there were some high noons you just didn't want to be out in, ones that even Rey had taken passes on scavenging in on Jakku, and this looked like it was shaping up to be one of them. Setting down her bag, she yanked out her camp blanket and cursed as she dug around at the bottom for a swathe of black that wasn't there. In her rush, she'd forgotten it. Biting at her bottom lip, she held the blanket above her head instead and pressed on.

She thought it was a mirage at first- the strange swell of it so organic in design that it couldn't possibly be real. Not in this heat. But that pull had come from the same direction, and as she gave in and continued on, the shimmering shapes solidified into large earthen domes of various sizes grouped together in what looked to be some sort of semi-permanent camp. Figures moved along its perimeter in the slow and steady pace of a guard watch. They were armed. And as Rey got closer, she knew they spotted her.

There was a small uplift of earth, and before she could see what they did next, she flattened her tiny form behind it. Did they think she was a mirage, too? She slowly lifted her head to let her eyes scan for any possible defenses when they crossed the entrance to the largest dome at the center and her breath choked in her throat. She pushed herself flat again, clutching her hand over her mouth.

*There.*
He was there.

She'd found him. And he was in a camp surrounded by what looked to be heavily armed thugs, just as reconnaissance had suggested. So why was she so surprised? She'd found him. So what was she going to do now? Rey realized, then, at that incredibly inconvenient moment, that she hadn't really planned that far. Or maybe she just hadn't expected him to be exactly where he'd told the council he'd go. She sighed. Kylo.

The time for turning back was gone. She was here, they'd seen her, and she was steps away from her goal. There was no changing it now. Her nose brushed the ground as she tried to center herself, taking in deep breaths without actually inhaling the dust around her, and slowly, she rose to her feet. She took a moment to pat herself down, and her actions were slow and deliberate.

If they see me coming, don't see any sudden moves, maybe they won't shoot me on sight...

Straightening her bag on her shoulder, she lifted her head, and walked steadily towards the camp.

Chapter End Notes

All the love in the world to AkhalOfAzeroth, AzAngel1, AshyWanKenobi, KarmaDash_is_ReyloTrash, SerenityMeyers, FrejaH, ReyloRobyn2011, Raxephan, kylojen, Karla, aiCHA77, ReyloArt, adjh, sleepy--dinosaur, Billysmind, Kbourne2012, mweerden, CharlotteCAgain, Starships, Chris Costa, arw5205, Aslajade, lolita_iori, Jacnice, Nina10, Sarah, Avdal, GigiMarie, Killertopaz96, Patricia Reis, Elle, Direwolves_Unite, and Sandeebeache5. THANK YOU GUYS for sticking with this story-- I know I keep saying that good things are coming, but they are closer than you think. And all you guys who have hung in there will definitely be rewarded- my only hope is that my writing can live up to it.

This is a shorter chapter, but I'm already working on the next one. This should have been out last sunday, but I had to work all weekend on a business trip. I'm sorry.

Tune in next time for when Rey walks into the literal lion's den. Should be good. Should be really good. :3
This is dedicated to all of you who have stuck with this story, through thick and thin. Haven't given up on it, or me, or stopped reading it despite my shitty update schedule. Have commented, kudo'd, and shown a level up support to me on tumblr that frankly I don't deserve.

This is for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Still, I'm a believer when you lie
Though we may never see eye to eye.
I've paid my dues and I'll be damned
If I see you back here again-

\[\text{I know what you've done and it's alright}
\text{Whatever gets you through the night}
\text{Pushing your knife into my back}
\text{Why'd you do that?}
\text{Why'd you do that?}\]

Ooh, what happened to you?
Ooh, what happened to you?
All alone and so ashamed
It's all I seem to know these days, said-

Ooh, what happened to you?
Ooh. What happened to you?
-to you...?"

—Emilie & Ogden

The guards aimed their weapons at her and it wasn't long until a proper welcome party of assorted thugs in piecemeal but no less effective armor came out to join them.

Her approach was unrushed, her face calm and almost aloof, but not lacking caution as she neared the edge of their camp. When she was no more than eight feet in front of them, she stopped. She heard the whine of their blasters as they primed to shoot her. One of them, a greasy-looking biped with a milky eye, stepped forward.

"Drop your bags, any weapons, everything, and turn around."

Rey stared at him as he grunted his order, unmoved. She could feel his trepidation, his mild
surprise- how did she get here? How had anyone managed to find them? She said nothing, did nothing, and her body tensed for any sudden attack.

The man's lip curled and he stepped forward to hold the blaster closer to his target.

"Drop you bag, your weapons, and turn around NOW!" he shouted.

Rey's mask of indifference faded as her face grew livid. Gritting her teeth, she glared at him with fire.

"WHERE IS KYLO REN!"

Her bellowing voice echoed through the camp off of the few outstanding structures. The group before her, and any passing through the dwellings, froze to the spot.

"WHERE," she repeated. "….is he?"

They stared at her in wide-eyed shock when suddenly the leader's brows started to rise. A laugh bubbled up, and then another, and soon he was nearly doubled over in laughter. Some of his party also joined in, slapping each other on the back as Rey looked on in surprise. But the rest didn't laugh- the rest looked at her with badly disguised fear.

Recovering, the leader righted himself, wiping a dear from his eye as he sought to catch his breath. "Oh," he said finally, "you don't want to see him. Are you suicidal?"

He gave another rather incredulous laugh before nodding slowly. "Of course you are," he continued, "that's why you came here. Now again, girl- drop your belongings, and TURN. AROUND."

His joviality melted as he raised his gun and pointed it squarely at her head. Rey stared down the barrel of the weapon. This was a terrible idea… she thought, and instantly she began to second-guess herself. If she did as they said and turned around…

There was a clattering sound, a brief commotion, and as Rey's eyes were drawn to the source she watched as a helmeted Kylo Ren, or what looked to be Kylo Ren (yes, yes, it is him, the tug told her) emerged from the large center structure and stepped up into the middle of the camp followed by several other individuals covered head to toe in black.

One of the party tapped the leader on the shoulder, who he promptly brushed off, until a second more incessant tap got him an annoyed "What?" only to see Kylo Ren slowly approaching them. The leader looked back to Rey and scoffed.

"Pft, looks like you're getting your wish, little lady," he snickered with an arched brow.

He held his weapon steady at her face, and Kylo and his party halted on the edge of the scene watching. Rey stared at the armed leader, eyes darting from him to Kylo who just stood there, and just as her hands clenched into frustrated fists and her mouth was about to open, Kylo swiftly stepped forward. Every man in the group visibly tensed. His helmeted head cocked slightly to the side.

"Leave the girl to me," his modulated voice snapped. Rey suddenly felt cold in the midday sun and a dreadful stillness overcame her at the sound of that vocoder. Her eyes never leave him when the leader sighed heavily and shrugged before lowering his weapon.

"Hey, whatever man. Have fun."
At the sound of a dismissal, several of them were off like a shot, happy and more than eager to be clear of the Knight, soon leaving him alone with her and his cohorts. His attention seemed to linger on her, and she blinked up with a slight timidness at him, trying to read him despite the mask. He was right in front of her, but as she tried to reach out, touch his mind with her own, she was met with nothing but a cold blankness. Walls. Walls upon walls. And she realized she couldn't reach him.

Her eyes widened as she stared into his visor, and her mind began to race- why? why? why? did he join back with the order? is he their leader again now? has snoke taken him back? has he betrayed us? after everything? betrayed me? betrayed…?

It was then she realized that she had lost him. If he'd gone back, if this was real, then the man she knew, the one who had welcomed her and held her and—

She grit her teeth and instantly her hand was at her hip, yanking her weapon free and igniting her saber. The pain coursed through her, nearly overwhelmed her- when did she become so invested in the idea of him? And as she stared with fury at the black figure before her, she swung the weapon above her head and began to slice swiftly down.

Instantly he stomped up to meet her, and without drawing his weapon he raised his arms and caught her wrists in his hands as she started her downward slash. Trapped in his grip, she struggled to complete her attack, shouted in frustration, screamed, until his hands squeezed hers almost painfully, forcing her fingers to reflexively loosen so he could slowly pry the weapon from her grip.

In his distraction, he never noticed as her knee slammed up to connect with his stomach with a final scream causing him to double over slightly at the blow, but it wasn't enough. His hands held strong until he finally wrenched the saber from her grasp, flicking it off. Attaching it to his belt, he pushed her hands down and yanked her forward by the arm.

"Execute what we discussed," he commanded to the band behind him as he pulled Rey forward with him. "Go."

With a quick nod, they dispersed, and slowly, he began to drag her with him. Tears streamed down her face in silence as they approached the same large structure he'd originally come out of, and as he flicked the door open with the force, he pulled her along behind him as he took the stairs leading inside.

It was deep, she absently noted- the dome above ground clearly serving as a ceiling. They continued down the stairs in silence, and as he touched the last step, his grasp weakened and she yanked her arm away. He didn't seem to notice, didn't see the anger on her face as he stepped into the middle of the large open area. He turned around and raised his hand again to force the door to seal itself. There would be no leaving from this place. As his arm lowered, he turned to her.

"What are you doing here?" he finally asked, breaking the silence.

She stood there, frozen on the last step, glaring painfully at him.

"Why are you here?" he asked again.

She stared at him. Stared at the mask. At his clothes. She could feel the pain edging in again, feel her breath start to speed up as her face contorted in pain.

"Why are you wearing that?" she asked bitterly.
He reared back a bit in surprise and, reaching up, pressed the hidden button to release the mouth guard and pull his mask away.

She gasped. He looked...the same. What did she expect? He looked the same, maybe a little more tired than when she last saw him on the base, a little more strained, but...it was him. And he was looking at her with that wide-eyed expression she suddenly realized she’d missed.

Her emotions betrayed her at the sight of him, dissolving her frustration, and somehow she no longer had it in her to fight it off. The tears came as she took him in.

"How could you leave me like that?" she sobbed. "How could you just leave me behind?"

She was crying, but even her own candor surprised her. Asking something like this…it was dangerous.

He gaped at her as his breath caught in his throat. "Did you think I wouldn't come back for you?" he insisted suddenly.

Rey shook her head, adamantly brushing his words away. "What is going on out here?" she declared, finally stepping down and moving cautiously towards him. "After everything, I thought—" she cried back.

His lip curled and he took a hard step forward. "Did you THINK," he bit strongly, "I wouldn't come back for you?"

She stilled, and he approached, his eyes a mix of anger, disbelief, and—

"I will always come for you," he said, standing before her. She looked up at him with a tear-stained face. "Always."

Those words. Finally those words, although the last time he said them they held such a different meaning. But he couldn't understand what they meant to her, those words - he couldn't possibly—but he did. He'd been in her head, and he knew. He knew, he knew, he knew.

Tears utterly obscured her vision when she felt his hands on her face, pulling her in, and crushing her lips against his. It had been so long, and the static that pulled them irrepressibly together ignited like a spark and suddenly her arms were around his neck, pulling him closer, bending her back to more easily reach up for him. She couldn't imagine letting go as he pressed eagerly for her mouth to open for him and she gave in without a thought. His mouth pulled back only to return and consume hers more fully, his hands digging into her sides before one slid up her back and another down across to grip into the top of her thigh.

This was different. All those times before, hiding beneath their meagre cover, they could never meld into each other like this, and every point of contact, every press of his thighs, his stomach, his chest against hers singed her.

She felt his hands shift to her belt, felt them start to pull at the wisps of fabric crossed over her breasts, when she looked up at him. He stopped and pulled away, catching his breath as her gaze lingered on his lips. When their eyes met, his eyes narrowed, almost pleading. His hand let go of her wisps to spread flat against her back. Slowly, taking her own deep breaths, she looked up into his eyes as she leaned into him, and as he accepted her, pulled her closer, his nose nuded hers and recaptured her lips as he pulled the strips of fabric free of their constraints.

Her hands shook as she tried to follow him without losing him, fumbling with his belt as she tried to suck his tongue into her mouth. As she pulled at the complicated clasp, pressing him even more
against her, he groaned into her mouth before bringing up his hand to her cheek, slowing her down, and gently pulling away. He felt for her hands and guided her to the hidden latch, and she watched as it, along with his broken and useless lightsaber still clipped to its holster, thudded to the floor.

She watched it fall, and when she looked up, their eyes met, and soon her gaze lingered on his face, on his scar, and a pang of regret ran through her. I did that—my fault. He seemed to sense it, did sense it, because suddenly he was there with her again, in the Force, and his eyes steeled as he crooked a finger under her chin, jerking her head to face him.

"No," he ordered through clenched teeth. "No, don't you think that."

He scowled as he ducked down, grabbing up her bottom lip with his teeth before his mouth covered hers again and she whimpered as he tugged her against him. Her mind blanked briefly until her arms wound their way around his neck, her hands finally tangled in his thick hair again as she felt her belt drop away and join his on the floor. Her fingers found the collar of his tabard and tugged. He growled against her mouth until she felt a sense of annoyance but agreement radiate from him and he reluctantly let her go to rip the guard away from his throat and yank the tabard over his head, exposing a broad expanse of chest criss-crossed with the ties that held together his arm guards. He ripped his gloves away and threw them to the floor as he peeled the guards away. She had little time to take in the sight of him, take in the massive scar in his side and the million others, big and small, scattered across the pale flesh, when he bent down to slip his hands beneath her tunic to hold her fast at the waist, lifting her up to him, and like instinct she wrapped her legs around him.

Somewhere her boots dropped to the floor as his mouth found her neck, and the second her back hit the rough-hewn wall, he sucked hard at the captured flesh and she arched towards him, groaning deeply as she held his head against her. She squeezed him closer against her as he worked, leaving a trail of wet kisses down the length of her neck until he was blocked by fabric which was soon lifted up and away.

She was gloriously bare beneath, and as he rested one hand on her waist, he brought up the other to gently cup her breast. The heat in him rose, he needed to taste her, but when he looked up, he found a delicate blush to her face. Slowly, he inched down only to catch up her nipple with the tip of his tongue before latching softly and sucking hard, causing a moan to involuntarily escape her throat and the blush across her face to increase.

It was difficult to reach the rest of her with his mouth and he growled with indignation. He kneaded her stomach with his hands as he lifted them up and away from the wall and carried her, clinging to his neck with hooded eyes, until he knelt onto the wide pile of carpets spread along half the space. He cradled her neck as they lowered, and he nipped beneath her uplifted chin as she sighed and squeezed him tighter between her legs.

Rey's eyes followed him dreamily without really seeing him, and his brow furrowed as he came up to her again, planting his arms on either side of her head.

"Rey…" he whispered, lowering his lips down to hers. The tips of her breasts brushed against his bare chest and he shuddered against her mouth.

To think she thought I wouldn't….

He growled as the thought clawed its way into his mind again. He couldn't believe—

He grabbed her roughly under the arms and jerked her up the carpet and she whimpered as it scratched against her back. He bit at her navel with a low sound rumbling at the back of his throat
as his fingers found the band of her trousers and he slowly pulled them down. She gasped beneath him and in an instant his eyes were on her. Her chest was heaving as her fingers brushed through his hair. He paused, licked just below her navel before leaving a wet kiss there, and when her eyes finally locked unwavering with his, he finished the task, grabbing up her ankles and setting them to the side to remove the unwanted clothing before grabbing her shin and putting himself back between her legs.

He kissed where the fabric had rested across her hips, claiming the indented space for himself and closed his eyes when he could finally smell her. So many times he'd been tempted at the base, to just taste her there- damn them all watching- but he'd had to think about her, and even now he was keen to think of her as he licked briefly at the top of the cleft of her sex. She gasped, twisting her body in such a way that on reflex he moved to hold her tightly- he didn't want her to move from this. He needed her right where she was…

He dared to duck lower, trace the outer opening of the thing he never quite realized he truly coveted until that moment, sucking one side of her pussy into his mouth before pulling back and diving into the space, licking a long strip along the length of her and she *keened* in his grasp. His tongue found her clit and sucked at it lightly, letting a low laugh free as she cried out beneath him.

He sniffed, glancing up at her with a smirk before looking back down at what lay before him when his brain had to start working again.

*How many times? How many others have been—*

Rey's head rolled from side to side as she gasped. *No one*, she thought back, incapable of words. He had no idea she had heard. *No one but you. Never...no one but you,* she repeated at him again.

He became deathly still, staring at her wide-eyed at the prospect of what she was saying washed over him.

*No one.*

Suddenly there was a hard tug at his hair, and when he instinctively looked up she soothed her fingers against his scalp as she peeked at him from between her delicate breasts.

"I won't break," she whispered, still running her fingers through his hair.

He swallowed.

"I won't," she insisted, raising her brows, and she tugged at him again as one brow lowered until she leveled him with an arched look and gave him a slight push downward.

"Now make it up to me," she said almost silently, but it was all he needed to hear as his eyes steeled, his lip twitching upwards, as he dove down to devour the center of her.

She let herself cry out- she didn't hold back. There was no one to hear- the door was sealed, he'd seen to that. She arched as his tongue traced her inner folds, sucked her into his mouth and lapped at her unrelentingly. She spread her knees further, digging her toes into his thighs desperate to pull him closer when the flat of his tongue rubbed roughly at her clit and the middle of her jerked upward with a choked cry. He crouched further down as he tucked his arm beneath her hips, raising her higher, the vibration from his throat causing an unceasing string of moans to pour from her as he sucked and flicked relentlessly at her captured bundled of nerves until she could feel the breaking point speeding towards her. Her free hand dug into the plush rug beneath them, fingers stinging as they desperately tried to get purchase, until her brow furrowed deeply and her mouth
opened wide until she came bucking hard against his face but he didn't let her go. Lifting her higher, her grip on his hair fell and he kept going even as the first wave subsided and she was left gasping, lightheaded, desperate for breath as another wave of pleasure quickly followed the last and she was *screaming* into the empty space. It wasn't until that finally passed that he let her down and watched with catlike eyes as he pressed her legs together and carefully straddled her thighs, crawling over her prostrate form, until he was nuzzling his face against her hair.

"Rey, Rey, Rey….

The world seemed to slowly come back to her as her hands found their way heavily around his neck. She was whimpering, his knees holding tight at either side of her. Oh gods, *is this what it was like?*

He was hushing her against her ear, leaving soft but no less urgent kisses against her cheek until he found her mouth again and covered it completely with his own. Without hesitation, her tongue found his and she knew she was tasting herself there amongst his own unique savor. His hands worked across her skin, massaging and coaxing calm from her, running down her arms as his lips covered as many inches as they could reach as he kept her close, always close, until she began to melt into his touch and, slowly, he lifted his knee to part her legs again. He cursed into the side of her neck in annoyance as he moved a hand away from her and began to fumble with the clasps of his trousers. It was distracting- anything that wasn't Rey was an annoyance and irritating and he felt her give a breathy laugh against his cheek when a warm hand suddenly covered his own.

He leaned back to see her looking up at him with a sly smile on those pretty lips now swollen from his attentions. He tilted his head slightly to the side. Her other hand joined the first as it worked to undo the trappings until the waistband hung loosely around his hips. He arched a brow at her as he sat back up onto his knees and, hooking his thumbs into the sides, pushed them down to reveal an erection more intimidating than she'd anticipated. She felt her mouth run dry.

"Don't worry," he managed to say as he shucked them the rest of the way off. "I promise you, don't worry…"

She looked up at him skeptically before his mouth was pressing her back into the carpets again, hungrier this time as he nipped at her lips, her chin, down the length of her throat. His hand squeezed at her breast and pinched *hard* at her nipple causing her to cry out in a curious mix of pain and pleasure. This was different….

He was back between her legs, but this time his teeth scraped against the most sensitive parts of her, and when her hand found its way back into his hair, she *pulled* as revenge but he only shouted against her before looking up at her with a smolder she'd not seen yet. He narrowed his eyes at her.

"Again," he gritted out through clenched teeth.

Her mouth gaped slightly as she stared back at him, but did as he said and pulled. He shouted again, cursed, before closing his eyes and breathing heavily as his hand disappeared downward, past her body. His fingers wrapped around his cock and he gasped as his fist squeezed and pulled at the over-sensitive flesh.

"Rey," he groaned, and she could feel the color heating her cheeks again at the sound of her name in that voice.

"Rey, *I need you…"* he groaned again. "*Please…please…"* he mindlessly begged.

Rey could feel a small sting against her eyes as she watched him give himself another firm pull. He
couldn't see her, but slightly, she nodded.

"Come here," she said quietly.

His eyes flared open as he looked at her.

"Come here," she repeated again, a little more strongly this time.

"But—"

"You promised, didn't you?"

His brow flinched as he sighed but she wouldn't relent.

"Come here."

He didn't need her to stay it again. He fell back upon her, and somewhere between the pulling of her lips with his, she felt the wide head of his cock push through, a tightness, a twinge, when she found herself pulling away, hissing from the burn but none the less reflexively raising her hips to meet his own. He gasped as she unexpectedly took more of him inside her and his forehead dropped to her shoulder as she writhed, whining here and there when he shook out his hand and firmly gripped her waist.

He didn't look up as he pulled back and slowly inched his way back in. He was groaning into her shoulder as she clawed at his back with high-pitched mewls. He did it again, and her gasping chest knocked into his. Somewhere in the back of his mind he wondered if he should wait, give her time, until he felt her pussy flex around him and his thoughts whited out as he carefully ran himself in deeper this time, and out once more.

She wasn't sighing pitifully anymore- no, as he went inside her again, her grip around his shoulders became more firm, and tentatively on his next pass she slightly raised her hips to meet his. She felt him exhale against her neck.

"Oh Rey…." he sighed, and when he came back to her she did it again.

His hand was gripped hard into her side as they found their rhythm and they met each other with each stroke. She could feel it, feel that feeling mounting again, but it was different this time, deeper, something more undefinable than when he'd had his tongue wrapped around her clit. Her voice clawed its way from deep within her as he hit one particular spot inside her and she flexed up to him hard.

He had her caged from above, skin slicked with their efforts as he took her over and over, and when she clenched around him he knew he'd finally found that place he'd been looking for. He grinned pointedly as he looked up at her from damp bangs. He tried again and she bucked onto him, causing him to curse as he fell to both his elbows for a moment before recovering to hold her still at her hip and plunged his tongue into her mouth as he slid into her again, faster this time, making sure to hit against that part that made her ripple around him, desperate for more of it.

His mind was filled with nothing other than the overwhelming desire to have this woman fall apart around his cock, and with that goal firmly in place, his hips snapped ruthlessly against her as they gained speed. She was shaking around him until she couldn't keep up with his mouth and had to pull away, crying out against his ear as she dug her nails into his shoulder blades. She had plunged her claws in so deep he knew she'd invariably draw blood and this spurred him on as the pain laced with the pleasure in his mind and the inside of her squeezed him harder.
He felt her bleed into his mind then, felt her start to lose the fight against this feeling, and he grasped onto that knowledge and her presence that brought it, pulling her mind deeper inside of his as he timed their climaxes together, pounding into her until his teeth bit into the flesh at the crook of her neck and her nails scratched a deep arc across the length of his shoulders.

She screamed out and he held her close, refusing to let her go as he went as long as he could stand until they were both still, physically melted into one other- nothing but a mass of overheated flesh, come, and sweat. He cradled her close as her grip began to slacken and he gradually softened inside her. Unwilling to break contact, he tried to shift down slightly to slide out of her when suddenly her arms came back, just as strong as ever, around his neck.

"Don't let me go," she gasped against his cheek.

He stilled and her nose nuzzled against him.

"Don't let me go," she whispered again.

Something inside him broke.

"No," he said quietly against her skin. "No, never again. Never again, Rey. Never again...."

And his lips slid over hers.

—

Outside, a footsoldier passed by the high, narrow ceiling vent of the structure and stopped in his tracks as sounds- particularly screams- seeped out dimly through the opening. He snickered- that stupid girl- Kylo Ren must be torturing the fuck out of her.

Occasionally a passerby would hear masculine shouts as well- maybe they were fighting. Must be one hell of a battle.

Ohhh if they only knew.

Exactly that.

Chapter End Notes

All aboard the smut train- the seal has been ripped off and it ain't goin' back on! But I promise it'll be tasteful and done to further the story. If you want PWP, check out my other works- there's certainly enough of it. xD

And, well, the very beginning of this chapter? It's what made me sit up in bed December 31st, 2015 and decided that I needed to write this shit down. It was the thing that pushed me to be here. And now that we've finally reached it, it's rather cathartic. Trust me that there's a lot more story to come, and hopefully it won't take as long now that this pivotal chapter's finally done- I took my time with this one because I wanted to get it RIGHT- I knew you guys would Lynch me if I screwed it up. So I hope it meets your expectations- I truly do hope it was worth the wait. And if it wasn't...well...I'm so sorry, but I'm not giving you your money back, nope, there are no refunds, it's mine now, and I hope the upcoming chapters make up for any disappointment, hahaha.
Anyway, time for the Real MVPs of this chapter- the commenters from last chapter who, after reading over everyone's thoughts again, spurred me to once more work on this chapter. And it was a success. This wouldn't have been finished and posted if not for you. Bless every single one of you starting with mweerden, LindseyintheSkywithDiamonds, bluetoast, Karla_shadow, AzAngel1, ReyloRobyn2011, DasFeministMermaid, Kbourne2012, butterfingers, KarmaDash_is_ReyloTrash, Direwolves_Unite, LisaMarieB, kylojen, Katiiedid, FrejaH, Sandeebeache5, Jacnice, Raxephan, Billysmind, CharlotteCAgain, g_girl143, Hormonal_Trashbag, No_Name_500, lolita_iori, isabelsighed, Chris Costa, aiCHa77, starpiercer, GigiMarie, Elle, Siku Maho, StellaPurple, Blaina, letthisgo, and finally Narika.

Again, without you guys, this chapter literally would not have been finished and literally would not have been posted today. Thank you.

And with that, I take my leave until next chapter- please, let me know what you thought. It means more than you realize.
He laid sprawled against her, their bodies pressed so closely together they nearly breathed as one. There wasn't a whisper of a sound from the outside as his face was buried in her neck, her fingers idly running through his hair. His arms were curled tightly around her as they rested in this twilight state of wakefulness and her cheek rested against his head.

She fingered one of his curls, wrapped it around her fingertip, when she suddenly inhaled.

"Ben..." she murmured, squinting slightly at the ceiling.

He stiffened atop her and her fingers stilled.

"What did you say?" he asked, frowning against her neck. He shifted in order to get a better look at her, to look up at her from his pillowed place against her shoulder, and stared at her with a troubling expression.

Rey felt a chill of dread as her wide eyes met his but it was too late, they were too wrapped up in each other's minds and the moment she felt it, she knew he already had, too.

"Ben," she said again carefully. She couldn't help it, and she watched as his eyes wavered over hers and shifted. It was Rey's turn to frown.

But in a moment, his stricken expression seemed to pass, and Rey could feel herself relax again until his brow smoothed into an expression she'd only ever seen on him once- that time he'd sobbed into her stomach- and as he raised up onto his forearms, he glided over her to softly, gently take her lips.

She breathed out.

The shift in him bled into her and she shuddered as he did it again, taking her bottom lip carefully between his, and when she slowly wound her arms around his neck and his hands slipped beneath her back, she knew—

Oh gods...

He held himself just above her, the weight of him pleasant as a hand drifted down her side. She gasped into his mouth and tried to spur him on, draw him in faster, but he refused, taking his time with his tastes until she was shuddering needily beneath him.

When he finally relented, she looked up into his face to see that same expression- it hadn't gone away...

"Turn over," he whispered, his hair brushing against her forehead.

With parted mouth and heavy-lidded eyes, she did as she was told, and as she began to move, he rose up just enough to let her.

She settled her cheek against her folded hands as he shifted down, gathering up and lifting her
loosened hair away as he kissed an agonizing trail from the back of her neck to the base of her spine, gifting each vertebra with his searing mark as she closed her eyes, feeling herself float into the sensation.

When he reached the end, he ducked his head again, kissing a particularly outstanding scar against her back before carefully grasping her hips and raising them just high enough for him to crawl back over her and slip his hand between her legs as her back arched into his chest.

She gasped as his wandering fingers traced along her inner ridges, slicked wet with her need for him, and finally found her clt as he dragged the pad of his middle finger against it in slow, circular motions. She bucked against him, lifting herself higher and gasping as he pressed himself down against her further, bowing his head to run his lips against her shoulder as he continued his torturous pace.

"Ben," she whimpered breathily again, and his finger pressed hard against her in response but didn't go any faster.

"Ben, please…" she gasped.

He smiled against her shoulder, glancing at her needy expression and tightly closed eyes. He seemed to consider as he left another wet kiss against her skin, lapping his tongue there as he ran his finger down amongst her folds to collect more of the quickly pooling wetness he found there before picking up his ridiculously slow pace again.

He could feel what she wanted. His smile grew. "No," he finally replied, and if it were possible, circled even more slowly while pressing harder against the aching bundle of nerves.

She whimpered loudly at his refusal, bucking back into him again as she felt his own arousal begin to solidify against the crease of her backside. Suddenly, he pressed down hard as he bit into her shoulder, causing her to cry out as he removed his hand and pushed himself up to kneel behind her.

She wouldn't stop making those tiny mournful sounds and as her irritation and arousal and desire for him to come back to her seeped into him, he looked down at her affectionately as he ran his cock along her slit, covering himself in her when she finally peered back at him through slitted eyes. He nudged her clt with the tip of him and he hissed at the sensation, watching as a catty smile spread across her pretty face.

He couldn't help himself- falling forward to cage her from above again, he looked down at her as their eyes met before bending further to leave a kiss on her cheek. A strange feeling passed from him as he did, and to his mild shock she reflexively returned it. He pulled away and they stared at each other, this silent exchange sinking in, before he steeled himself, ducking down to kiss her cheek one last time before raising himself up and firmly holding her by the hips as he slipped inside.

He forgot everything, again, as she nearly sucked him in, more than ready for him as he hilted himself into this new position. He let go a sigh as her back dipped low and he ran his hand up her spine, watching with hooded eyes as she arched into his touch. As he pulled his hand back, he pressed her back down again as he straightened back up and began to move.

His speed was no better this way than it was with his hand against her clt, and as his head shifted against new places inside her she moaned against her hands and tried to push herself up to meet him. He wouldn't let her, holding her tightly as he slowly, excruciatingly pushed into her. Sweat broke out along her back, and as her hands jolted away from her face, she desperately pulled at the carpet, grasping for purchase when he grit his teeth, reared back, wrapped his arm around her
stomach, and quickly flipped her over, twisting her around his cock, until he was planted between her legs and biting into her breast as she moaned loudly into the high empty space above.

His mouth was hurried, making up for the pace of his thrusts which he refused, to her never-ending frustration, to speed up. She grabbed for his face, removing his mouth from her skin with an audible -pop- and pressed his lips to hers. He kept distracting her, but with his tongue running along hers she could finally start to feel it build again and its inkling intensity scared her as she slung her arm more firmly across his shoulders.

What he was lacking in speed, he was quickly making up for in intensity, now edging them both further up the rough carpet with every pound of his hips. She gave in, desperate, and met him with every thrust, the burning at her back somehow adding to the growing sensation as he began to growl into her throat. Her fingers wound into his hair until she was mindlessly pressing him into less of a kiss and more of a collision of teeth as the deep friction he built within her suddenly blossomed and she writhed, impaling herself onto him as his arm wrapped around her waist, lifting her up. She shifted her head away, unable to bear his kiss, and instead held him against her shoulder as her climax crept over her, filling every vein in her overwrought body with a pure euphoria as time itself seemed to slow her down until he had to take the lead. Her arms wound around his head, cradling him close, and she cried out against his hair until she felt him tense in her arms, broad chest heaving almost desperately against hers, and he squeezed her against him to the point of bruising as he came hard inside her and she could feel as he filled her, feel as it spread into every inch of her, until it had nowhere left to go as his come seeped around his cock and trailed down her backside.

Slowly, he lowered down with her, keeping them joined as she gaped at the ceiling and he whimpered against her neck before eventually pulling free and collapsing next to her, arm sprawled across her waist.

They awoke just before dawn as they had previously been, tangled limbs and his face buried against her skin, breath steady as an unfamiliar peace continued to fill his bones.

Her fingers couldn't seem to leave his hair as she combed through it, and as much as he despised it, he could sense the sunrise coming.

*We have to leave,* his mumbled thoughts reminded him, *before the camp awakes.*

*I know,* came an unexpected reply, and in that moment both shifted to stare at each other with a slight frown.

*Did I just—*

*Yes.*

"Well that's new," she said quietly. He huffed and leaned up to press a kiss to her lips. Her hand slid down to his cheek as she met him more eagerly than he anticipated, and when he finally pulled away, he smiled.

"Get ready. We're leaving," he murmured, and gently rocked back to rise up to his feet.

It took some time to redress, collecting bits and pieces of discarded clothing across what was otherwise meant to be a large gathering space. Rey thanked whatever deities may still have been watching over her as she located a basin and jug filled with water and did what she could to clean
herself, eventually tossing the rag at him and leaving him to do the same.

They worked in virtual silence until they stood toe to toe, mostly clothed, as he held out her lightsaber to her. Rey shook her head as she looked down at it.

"Your mother said this was yours," she said finally, pushing it back towards him.

"Well…maybe it is mine," he replied with a sly grin.

"Then…” Rey began, tilting her head for understanding. "Wouldn't you—?"

She blinked up at him as he continued to hold it out to her, her eyes widening. Ben shook his head.

"I'm giving it to you."

Rey stared at him in disbelief.

"Why would you do that?" she asked as his hand found its way around her waist and he bowed his head close to hers, hair loosely curtaining his face. His eyes never left her as he slowly began to push her backwards, pressing the weapon into her hand.

"Because it'll keep you safe," he murmured finally as her back hit the wall.

Her eyes flicked to his lips. "Ben…"

Snaking her free hand around his neck, she pulled him, yes, Ben she whispered again, towards her until their lips crashed together and he had her pressed roughly against the wall, her leg begging to arch up over his hip until his hand came down to squeeze it firmly as he pulled away.

"Come on…we have to go."

He set to work assembling the rest of his blacks as she tried to pack anything else she could find. Soon he was standing before her, the picture of Kylo Ren with his helmet tucked under his arm. Rey glared at it before looking back up at him and she could feel their connection sooth between them.

"I have to collect a few more things from outside. Supplies. See to a few others."

Rey nodded as he made for the base of the steep stairway and he turned back towards her. "I'll be back," he said with a slight smile before pulling the helmet over his head and taking the stairs two at a time, roughly pushing open the door, and then slamming it behind him. Rey could hear it latch just in case- and with that caress against her mind she smiled despite herself.

Finally finished with her own packing, taking anything else that could have been of use, she sat and she waited. It wasn't long until the door clicked and she scrambled to her feet as he left the door open and he met her at the bottom of the stair, helmet back in hand. With a silent flick of his hand, he motioned for her to follow and waited till she cleared the door topside before tossing what looked to be a small, high-powered explosive very near the center of the chamber. She could feel him grinning as he shut the door and crushed the insides with the Force, permanently sealing it. Taking her arm, he guided her through the eerily empty camp.

"We can't take a vehicle," he said quietly as he led her at a brisk pace. "Too easy to track. But I've downloaded the coordinates and we should be able to get back to the base by dusk."

Rey blinked up at him as he continued ahead of her, and looked around herself as no one greeted
them and no one questioned their hasty departure on foot from the camp.

"What…" she began, nearly tripping over a small boulder until he relaxed, letting her go and letting her walk on her own volition. "What did you need to do back there?" she tried again, glancing behind them. He shook his head and pointed at the expanse before them, trying to focus them both on the right direction.

"I already destroyed all communication devices when I arrived. I told them I was on an off-the-grid mission and needed to stay dark."

"So it really was a First Order camp…"

"Of sorts. Mercenaries. Cheap manpower paid to do grunt work the Order doesn't want to waste bodies on."

She nodded.

"I also crippled all transport and burned any supplies we didn't take," he said, holding up a small sack.

Rey frowned. First Order or no, the desert-dweller in Rey cringed at the loss, especially now with the dreadfully broad horizon spread ahead of them, but he glanced at her as the corner of his mouth quirked up.

"I did it to force them out of the camp and to move on," Ben replied in answer to her unspoken question, and though she inhaled deeply with a lingering disapproval, she felt herself trust him. She decided to trust him. And as they moved vigorously across the barren landscape, she wound her hand around his arm, gripping it tightly as she stared ahead and they continued on side by side.

Ben swallowed hard, looking at her somewhat in shock. But as she finally met his look with a bright smile, he found himself smiling back, and in that moment, felt the Force expand.

Chapter End Notes

GOSH, y’all, “PREY” has come back with a bang (literal and figurative hah) and it’s all thanks to you!! Thank you so much for loving this story, and I’m trying hard to stick to a schedule now- if I’m able to keep it up for three weeks then I’ll feel comfortable saying what that schedule is, but for now I don’t want to spook my muse by making any promises. xD

Anyway, I need to say a very massive thanks to the champions of last chapter, and they are Sandeebeache5, catofthecures, bluetoast, DasFeministMermaid, starwarsreylo, JediKnightress (AzAngel1), Bripenguin2013, Sarah, Monharki, AugieBoogie, Direwolves_Unite, Plato, FrejaH, aiCHA77, Katiedid, Jamy98, IsobelBloom, Karla_shadow, Raxephan, ReyloRobyn2011, mweerden, GigiMarie, Killertopaz96, arw5205, jayra177, CharlotteCAgain, Hormonal_Trashbag, akhalofazeroth, DalekandtheTARDISat221B, No_Name_500, sarena, Sarah_Jo42, Nina10, Narika, lolita_iori, Patricia Reis, Cozybones, AshyWanKenobi, Ellensama, g_girl143, Billysmind, Aproclivity, Jessica Mathes, Greenfaery11, Jacnice, reyvenpi, kylojen, Ovoxoprad, DarkPhoenix24, and Amygdala, along with all of the beautiful people supporting this story on Tumblr.
I didn’t mention anything last chapter, but I’ve been battling a twice-sprained wrist and basically you guys have helped me power through to keep writing. I mean…my hand was literally *tingling* by the time I was done with this chapter, and I thought I was in trouble after it, but then it felt great in the morning!! xD So, I’m chalking that all up to you guys- thank you for pushing me with your encouragement. :)

Ok, I’m shutting up! What will happen with these two if they go back?? The mystery!! See you all (hopefully very) soon!!

PS: The bomb exploded in the title.
Very special thank-you to ohthatbunnygirl for beta-ing this chapter as I was pulling my hair out over it. I bless you into infinity!

Just as he'd promised, as the sun began to sink below the dusty horizon, the base appeared ahead of them, wavering mirage-like in the late evening heat. Rey walked beside him, lost in her own thoughts as her boots grit into the parched landscape with every blind step.

Silently, he reached across and grabbed her arm to pull her to him as he took a few paces back, glaring the place down before it could get any closer. Rey looked up at him questioningly before her eyes focused and narrowed in on the structure in the distance.

"I need to wear the helmet." he declared, sucking his bottom lip into his mouth in thought without looking at her. "Before they see me…I have to."

Rey frowned and glared down at the piece of armor he gripped tightly against his side.

"Why?" she asked pointedly.

"It's hard to explain."

"Try me," she insisted. He winced.

"Because," he began, finally looking down at her, "if we walk into that and it isn't what you expect…"

He trailed off, his lips pressing tightly together. "I just want us to be ready," he finished, eyes searching her face. They seemed to trace over her, memorizing her, and something about it scared Rey. She covered his hand on her arm with her own.

"I can't believe that they would…" she started before stopping herself, looking down and unconsciously pressing closer to his side. His other hand grabbed at the fabric of her wisps tentatively between two knuckles before brushing his fingers lightly against her back.

He tilted his head down to look at her as she stared at the ground in thought. She didn't want to think they could actually shoot them down, but he felt slowly as her mind worked through the scenarios.

When she looked back at him with wide eyes, he tried to give her a small smile.

"It'll be alright," he murmured, and although she watched him with worry marring her brow, she said nothing more. He let her go, lifted the scuffed metal between his hands, and with one last slight smile, settled it back over his head.

"Let's go."
Rey tried not to shudder at the sound of that familiar vocoder but, steeling herself, she nodded. She looked down at his open hand and slipped her own into it. His fingers slowly wrapped around hers firmly, and with one final glance, they started forward.

She didn't know when their hands slipped away from each other, contact replaced by bumping shoulders as more and more of the base came into focus- along with all of its soldiers patiently lying in wait for them. They were rows deep along the entrance, and many, many more in the hidden battlements secreted along its broad, low-profile dome. Rey made sure to breathe.

It'll be fine…

Soon she could make out individual faces, and in the crowd her friends. Her friends. Her hopes rose, a small smile daring to spread across her face, until Kylo's head suddenly quirked upward. With a jolt, he gripped her roughly by the arm and flung her behind him, his posture bent to spring as, with one swift move, he grabbed for the saber at his belt and ignited it, its red plasma spirals bursting to life at his side.

They have their weapons trained on us, he pushed towards her but Rey wasn't listening. Her eyes were wide with incredulity as she tightly gripped the fabric covering his back, unable to look away from that damned weapon.

"WHERE DID YOU GET THAT?" she hissed at the back of his helmeted head, anger and annoyance suddenly curling through her.

Although she couldn't see it, she knew he was smirking. The idiot was pleased with himself. His arm pushed back and tucked itself around her, holding her firmly at his back as his attention shifted forward again. She felt his muscles tense and she huffed.

"DISARM YOUR WEAPONS," Kylo's distorted voice projected at the gathered assembly.

Silence.

"Rey?" a familiar voice called out. Poe shifted to the front of the line but didn't break rank in the face of an armed Kylo Ren. Kylo pointedly ignored him.

"Deactivate your weapons!" he ordered again. "Do it now."

Rey was still at his back as his arm pressed into her. She could feel her own anxiety licking at her, along with her friends' distress. They thought something terrible had happened, that—

There was a rustling, distant chatter, when an older, commandeering voice called out above the rabble.

"Call off the guns!" General Organa shouted, quickly pushing her way to the front. She brought her transmitter to her mouth. "Call them off!"

Rey's chin dug into Kylo's shoulderblade, torn between trying to look over his massive form and staying hidden. He could feel her growing worry and his hand spread against her back.

"Lower your weapons, I said! My god!" Leia snapped in irritation.

Finn, his eyes narrowed and blaster aimed impeccably at his former leader's helmeted head, dropped his gun with a grunt and a twitch of his lip. He stared angrily at the man ahead of them, and Poe watched him sadly before discretely reaching over and hitting the safety on his friend's weapon.
Rey could sense Leia at the front of the mass of soldiers and she swallowed hard. Gripping at Kylo's tabard, she slowly, carefully pulled herself up, peering cautiously over his shoulder.

Leia stood unafraid, confident in her place among the masses of armed men and women, her face determined and set as she stared down her son. She seemed to size him up, his posture ready to strike and lightsaber flickering dangerously as he held the object of his protection firmly behind him when she saw the girl catch a glimpse over the hulking mass of her child.

Leia rolled her eyes before arching her brow and looking straight past Kylo.

"I see you found him, Rey," the General called, ignoring the drama exuding from Kylo Ren.

Rey's eyes widened as she gripped his clothing tighter, giving a small hop to look more clearly beyond him.

"Um," she jumped a little higher, trying to hoist herself up. He grunted. "Yes! I did, yes..." she replied, before giving up and pressing past his arm to look at the crowd.

Leia's mouth turned up in a small smile as she looked at the young woman, but her son...her son would not back down.

Finally shifting her gaze to him, she fixed him with a look. *Really?* she sent towards him. *Still?*

Rey felt him start slightly beneath her hands when, slowly, he straightened and, little by little, his grip on her became less like iron. With one last moment of hesitation, his thumb found the weapon's switch and he flicked his saber off. Rey breathed in heavily and sighed, plunking her head against his back in relief. Carefully, he let her go- his arm brushing against her, fingers trailing as she finally came around to stand beside him and his hand disappeared to rest at the small of her back as they stood closely together.

Finn watched with a guarded expression, and his eyes followed Kylo's other hand as it reattached his saber to his belt. Two weapons rested there now, almost identical save for a diagonal slash rendering useless the first...

Leia led the crowd in coming forward, and as Rey subtly nudged closer to his side, he broke away to raise up his hands, disengage his mouthguard, and pull the helmet away from his head. He took in a breath of the hot dry air, a curl clinging to the side of his face, when he finally looked down at her.

They'd made it, somehow, she mused to herself. There wasn't an all-out shoot-out, no one was screaming anything terrible at them. They'd survived this damn planet a *second* time- again because he'd forced them to, her mind helpfully added, but she brushed that thought away. What mattered was that the General was getting closer, the General wouldn't hurt them, and because Kylo had actually done what he said he would, that *had* to count for something.

Rey's mind was spinning- the past full week alone was enough to make her exhausted. But there was that familiar tug, again, and a warmth curled through her that made her sigh. Her eyes lowered, and discretely she gave his hand a gentle squeeze. Something about this, this path, felt like the right one to be on, and suddenly Rey was beaming at him. Drawn by her attention, his eyes met hers and her smile widened as big as he'd ever seen it. He looked back at her knowingly until he realized her smile wasn't going away and the corner of his own mouth quirked up despite himself. He brow marred in surprise as his own expression grew. She then gripped his arm, and when Leia finally reached them, they both turned to see the diminutive but no less powerful commander of the Resistance looking up at them both with tears in her eyes.
Poe and Finn pressed their way to the front and Rey found herself sniffing back her own tears as Finn strode forward and pulled her into a tight hug.

"We were so worried about you….are you alright?"

"I'm fine!" she said with a grin, holding him close until he finally relented. Poe in turn grabbed her arm in welcome.

"The General wouldn't let us send patrols…" he continued, eyes flitting almost imperceptibly in the direction of the man looming next to her.

Kylo moved with Rey as the crowd drew the circle around them in tighter. His hand rested protectively at the small of her back as she spoke animatedly with her friends and his eyes seemed to glaze over as he looked away and tried unsuccessfully to tune their conversation out. She'd been gone for days- what did she see out there? Why would she leave without ever leaving a note? They had all assumed the worst…

"I have so many things to tell you…" Rey beamed.

His hair hid his eyes from view as his hand never left its spot at her back, keeping her close. He tried to contain himself, but even as he felt the relief flooding through Rey, he couldn't help but wait for this entire thing to backfire. Was it really so easy to infiltrate the Resistance by cooperating with a single mission? He wouldn't even accept it. He’d still slap him in cuffs. He’d still drag him kicking and screaming back to that useless, claustrophobic cell in the bowels of their hobbled-together base.

A twitch of his hand as he unknowingly pressed his fingers more firmly against her back drew Poe’s attention.

Her.

The rush of people around them stirred the still air, but every now and then the scent of her would drift towards him. Part of him knew, somehow, that…whatever was between them now was infinitely sturdier than it had been before. Just reaching tentatively for that connection revealed a heartier thing. He felt her more, they could hear each other- a phenomenon they seemed to be able to slip into and adopt easily in the past solar day, as if they had always communicated that way. Nothing like the crass clawing through the Force he had continuously attempted when all this started

No, it wouldn't kill him to be away from her again like it had in the past. Even so, the idea that, after all this, after the exquisite 12 hours where she'd been all his with no Resistance, no Leia Organa, no anybody, that he might not be allowed to cage her in, run his hands where he pleased, hear her beg for him, and repeat her name like the prayer it had come to be….that he wouldn't be able to bury his face against her neck that night and breathe her in….it viciously clawed at him.

Poe carefully arched a brow, glancing at the tall man who appeared lost in thought, until he found Kylo suddenly meeting his gaze. The pilot's look was laced with skepticism, expression twitching slightly, but Kylo stared back, face morphing into perfect blankness, giving him nothing.

Fuck this.

They were talking about leaving, going somewhere to catch up, and Rey was being pulled away. Finn was eager to hear everything over food and drink- eager to get her away. She smiled and started to get swept up with them, when the crowd parted like the sea, and they came. The soldiers
moved forward with raised guns as Kylo's fingertips nearly dropped away from her. Rey's good mood struggled to distract her until her mind snapped back into place and panic suddenly washed over her, pulling Kylo out of his reverie along with her.

"No!" she cried out, pulling away from her friends. She pushed her way to stand in front of him, and Leia looked on with a torn expression-as much as this was her base and her command, there were rules for a reason. Her son's crimes were so large…

Finn looked distraught as he tugged at his friend's arm again.

"Rey," he half pleaded, but she wouldn't budge.

"No," she said strongly again, glancing over at Leia, looking for some sort of back-up. Kylo stood at attention, caught in mild confusion as Rey stood between him and reincarceration.

'Rey…' his mind whispered towards her. His hands itched to reach up and touch her shoulders…

Rey shook her head suddenly, as if trying to flick something away.

The captain of the guards approached her, dividing the ranks of guards as he came.

"Rey, please move," he asked not unkindly.

She stared up defiantly at him. "There is no reason to arrest him again," she declared.

The man sighed. "Kylo Ren is still—"

"Kylo Ren took care of the First Order camp. Isn't that what you were worried about?" she half shouted, looking around at everyone gathered. Somewhere at the very back she spied Caluan Ematt looking on with a skeptical but careful expression. She swallowed hard, reaching back to rest a hand against Kylo's arm.

"The camp's been taken care of. Diverted. Because of Kylo Ren."

When she was met with nothing but silence and stares, she could feel her irritation spike. "Isn't that what you wanted? He did exactly as he said he would, did he not?"

The man closed his eyes briefly, taking in a breath. "Rey—"

"He escaped his cell," she enunciated. "This whole time he could have broken out, done something…" she paused, brow wincing with emotion. "Done something horrible!" she finished, looking around at them all.

"But he didn't!" she declared. "He stayed where you left him, stayed willingly! And I know you know that the cuffs are no good either, that you saw him get free of them."

At that, Kylo's eyes widened as the crowd began to murmur amongst itself. Kylo studied the impassioned woman in front of him. Wasn't she the one who had…?

Somewhere, Leia coughed quietly as she looked on. His eyes snapped to the General with a curious frown until the captain of the guards sighed heavily. Rey could feel his mind turning her words over, considering them. She could feel him admit to the truth of what she said, that perhaps they could make a reinforced cell to keep him in, but it could take weeks to accomplish. What were they to do?

"Put him in my custody!" Rey declared suddenly. The corner of Kylo's lip twitched up.
Protests rose immediately but Rey held her ground with defiance despite the nervousness she felt. Kylo peered around at her, arching a brow. Amusement was written clear across his face- was she serious? But the moment she shot him an angry look, his brows went up in surrender, and with a neutral expression he just as quickly looked away again. She wanted to do this. He'd leave her to do it.

Shifting her attention back to the exasperated captain who was desperately trading looks with a concerned Ematt, she sighed.

"Look," she began. "You have indicated from the beginning that you feel only a Force user can contain another Force user. That's why you restricted access to his cell, correct? Well….."

She took in a deep breath as she looked at the poor man plaintively. "Here I am! I brought him back. And he's done his mission as it was proposed. And as 'keeper', so to speak…" she continued, pushing the idea home, she glanced up at her would-be ward and tried to give him a hopeful expression. "I believe he's ready to be debriefed. Aren't you?"

Kylo stared at her in shocked silence for a moment before she prompted him with a widening of her eyes. He swallowed hard, trying to push down the reflexive disgust at having to answer to these people again. These idiots who could have made this so much simpler if they had just listened to him…

'And they will listen to you now…if you really want this…' she pushed to him. She was pleading.

Kylo looked back down at her with a mix of indignation and resignation. His eyes, briefly, flicked down to her lips, before focusing back on her eyes but the movement wasn't lost on her. He could feel the shift of feeling in her, physically present as a light blush against her cheeks. His face softened. There had to be some perks to this…

"I am," he said finally, barely registering the words as they came out of his mouth. He didn't look away from her as she smiled and turned back to the crowd.

"There," she said matter of factly. "See?"

"Rey isn't wrong," chimed a new voice as Leia cut through the din, causing a wave of quiet. "And if anyone decides that isn't good enough, they can come to me. Two Force users are more than enough of a guard."

She was lying, Kylo knew it. Why. Why would she lie? This was getting exhausting.

"You all know me," she continued. "You can rest assured that despite the circumstances, my objectivity will be absolute in any issues that may arise."

Her eyes drifted toward Ematt who stood there, arms crossed, looking decidedly put out as she smiled in his direction. "And frankly I'd rather be debriefing our new asset instead of standing out here in this awful heat."

She arched a brow in the older man's direction, and observed as he heaved a sigh and marched off, back to the base.

Guess we've won this round, Leia mused to herself. For now…

Leia nodded to the guards. "Documents will be worked up as to the transition of a prisoner to legal asset. You'll receive them in 48 hours, captain."
Resigned, he saluted her, grateful to have reached some sort of solution, and, taking the rest of his troops with him, departed.

Rey seemed to physically deflate as people started to slowly break away- the show was over. She wearily looked up at her new, looming responsibility with a tired smile.

"That was very reckless," he mumbled.

"But it worked," she replied, grinning widely, before bending over and resting her hands on her knees, trying to calm her racing heart. He wanted to touch her, but she wasn't as close and there were too many people still around. He didn't want to give them any reason to question her guardship of him, to try and separate them.

So he clenched his fists. He held them tightly as he looked down at her as the General crept close and that incessant friend of hers came back, carefully avoiding him and resting his hand on her shoulder to get her attention. He tried not to resent the fact that Finn could in this moment, and he couldn't…

Rey lifted her head at his approach and nodded happily to her admittedly less enthusiastic friend. He tried to even out his breathing as Rey finally turned to him and rested her hand on his arm.

"Will you be alright?" she asked.

"You abandoning your post already?" he asked, daring to brush his gloved hand quickly against hers.

She smirked up at him. "You get to debrief now, remember?" she said, glancing at Leia waiting patiently. "There's two of us, here for you."

He couldn't help wincing slightly at her words and nodded towards her, silently urging her to go on with them. She smiled in return as she started to move away, her hand trailing down his arm until it reached his hand, squeezing it in her own, before her fingers left his. As he watched her move away, Leia drew closer, looking with cautious optimism into the placid face of her son.

He was too distracted watching Rey laughing with her friends to see her standing in front of him. The woman smiled up at him, determined to hold back any tears.

"Ben…" she called quietly, and as if 15 years had fallen away, his head snapped back to look at her with that same teenage petulance she never forgot- that same embarrassment at being called after by his own mother when he was trying to be an adult.

Her smile widened, and reaching up, she flung her arms around his neck (maybe pushing him towards her with a little help of the Force), and pulled him into an embrace.

He nearly choked in surprise, sputtering before a broken but no less scandalized, "Mom!" burst out of him as he half-heartedly tried to pull her off.

In the distance, Rey spun around, the sound as well as the undisguised shock radiating out of this man grabbing onto her, and she looked on as he seemed to give in, and his hands tentatively found the back of that diminutive but no less imperiously strong woman. Rey couldn't help it, the tears, as they clouded her vision and ran their way down her cheeks.

"Ben…" Rey echoed back almost silently, and soon her friends were stopped, too, engrossed in the scene as the warlord held his rebellious mother.
"Well I'll be..." Poe trailed off, scratching in wonder at the stubble appearing on his chin. He watched mother and son, before turning back to see Finn's conflicted face and Rey....Rey's face, shot with tears and a surprisingly heartfelt smile.

The smile was contagious, despite its cause, but all the same, he wondered....

With one last pleased glance, she turned away, and once safely back inside the Resistance stronghold, away from the hot and the dust, their laughter echoed down the corridors towards the canteen.

"You hungry, Rey?"

Rey smiled up at her friends as she wiped her face clean. "Starving."

--

Leia sighed against the shoulder of her child. She curled her arms around him even tighter despite the growing agitation, the awkwardness, she could feel growing inside him.

*Awkwardness be damned*, she thought contentedly, when there was a shuffling behind her.

"Ma'am," a voice called.

Reluctantly, Leia slowly pulled back from her son. His eyes seemed incapable of focus as she looked into them, a million light-years off, but as she glanced at the guard waiting for her, she knew he'd have to pull it together. She rested her hand on his arm.

"Yes, what is it?" she replied finally.

The man stood to attention. "I'm here to escort you...both. Major's orders."

Leia arched a brow, taking in a deep breath as she looked up at Ben.

"You ready for this?" she asked in a low voice.

He was trying not to shake, trying to process that she, his mother, had *touched* him, after so many years...he was silently seething that he'd immediately have to deal with those bastards after having his mother's essence in the Force curl around him just as it had as a child. Did she know she did that when she held him? It didn't matter...he didn't have time to ask her now.

Swallowing, he shoved it all aside until his face resumed the mask he saved especially for the 'committee'. He could feel Leia flinch at the transformation, but considering what might lie ahead of him, he couldn't bring himself to care.

Leveling his gaze at the guard, he gave the slightest nod of his head.

"I'm ready."

Chapter End Notes
Hello, you lovely readers you! I have a couple things I'd like to mention so I hope you'll bear with me–

1. I'm hoping to start keeping to a schedule and to make Fridays "PREY" day! So long as nothing else keeps getting sprained on me (I have terrible luck).

2. I know many of you would like to get chapters sooner. Right? Recently I set up one of those Patreon things for some of my original writing, and thought it would be fun to add a bit of something for anyone who likes my fics as well. If you'd like to get chapters of stories like "PREY" sooner, I'll be posting them as a sort of 'advance copy' viewing up on Patreon on Wednesdays- two days before they hit Ao3. :D And, if you're interested in being an especially delicious patron, there'll also be postings of this week's chapter's outline and assorted notes (things like 'deleted scenes', if they apply- I kind of have a running document of them at the moment and would love to share them!) on Fridays to coincide with regular Ao3 post days. So you have a chance at that, along with a growing body of my original work (mostly short stories, some of them a bit weird. One of them won an accolade, though, so they can't be that bad!), if you'd like to do the Patreon thing here: http://www.patreon.com/kagamisorciere

And, as a special treat, you can currently read the NEXT chapter of "PREY" up on Patreon right now! Otherwise, it'll be up next week as usual, haha. (but for those who can't wait to know what happens next...)

There's already a couple folks over there which is really exciting, and Patreon offers a neat community feature, so I hope we can have a lot of fun over there! :D Otherwise, everything's the same here on good ole Ao3, just as it's always been. :)

3. I would be dead and buried without Bripenguin2013, Raxephan, CandyDreamEP, ReyloRobyn2011, BriarRose (Aryael), Hormonal_Trashbag, JediKnightress (AzAngel1), DalekandtheTARDISat221B, Karla_shadow, Plato, mweerden, Greenfaery11, Direwolves_Unite, Amygdala, bluetoast, FrejaH, lolita_iori, jayra177, Cozybones, reyvenpi, Starships, AngryDragonPuppy, Jacnice, CharlotteCAgain, Billysmind, AshyWanKenobi, GigiMarie, knightsofreyloren, No_Name_500, All_The_Feels, DasFeministMermaid, one_not_from_around_here, DarkPhoenix24, AnaiRees, Astro_Gobo, Palom, Sarah, Elle, Nina10, and Avdal– thank all of you so, so much for your kindness and encouragement. You honestly have no idea what it means to me. ;--;

4. I've done the math and this story can definitely get finished before TLJ comes out (HAHA), so I'm quite determined!! We're still a bit of a ways off from the end, though, so don't worry- there's still some particularly juicy stuff coming up that I've had planned for a year now that I am SO excited to finally get to. I hope you guys enjoy it, too!! D:

OK, that's it from me!! See you on Patreon, and see you next Friday! :D
At close to lights out, the door to Rey’s quarters finally slid shut behind them and tentatively, they looked around only for their eyes to meet as they gazed at each other. In silence, Kylo moved forward and reflexively Rey mirrored him until they were almost circling one another. He stopped once he reached the side of her bunk. He never took his eyes off her.

Rey swallowed as she blinked slowly at him. "We should get cleaned up."

"Come here."

Rey froze at the softly issued command, hesitation filling her. She watched him as his hand rose slightly towards her.

"Ben…" she quietly reasoned.

"I've been stuck with my mother and her damn committee for hours. Your room is clean. They can't watch us here."

Rey pressed her lips together as her eyes drifted down to his hand. No, this wasn't the cell. They couldn't see.

Slowly, she took a step forward, and it was all the cue he needed to rapidly close the distance, his arms sweeping around her as his mouth pressed to hers. She sighed breathily against him and he licked at the seam of her lips, nipping the skin until her body relaxed and she melted into his embrace, opening to him. Her hands rested gently on his upper arms as he held her, tongue laving at the inside of her mouth, against her tongue, almost lazily until all of Rey's previous thoughts evaporated. He tasted so good- how could she not let him tug her in more?

When he finally pulled away, her head immediately tucked against his neck as he cradled her in his arms.

"Rey…"

She held onto him more firmly, letting her senses swim in his comfort and enjoying the momentary weightlessness until reality began to slowly trickle back. His breath lightly huffed at her hair, and his lips brushed against her temple. Her hand slid up his arm tucked around her.

"We should get cleaned up," she said again, softer now.

Ben hummed, but made no move to let her go, and neither did she as she settled against him more. His grip tightened.

She felt so safe. It was unnerving precisely when it inspired the opposite. What a mess. Her
fingertips played over the sculpt of his bicep.

"The canteen will close soon so we'll have to be quick if we're to make it."

"We?" he finally replied.

Against his chest she nodded. She shifted to look up at him.

"You need to eat, don't you?"

He glanced down at her, suspicion clearly written on his face as he gave a light shrug of his shoulders. "Ohh I suppose…"

Rey smirked and, feeling the regret spreading through her already, carefully disentangled herself from a reluctant Ben. She turned, making her way to the refresher and leaving him to his own devices in the middle of the room.

He looked around as the water came on with a distant whoosh. Taking a seat on the edge of her bunk, he ran his hand across the mechanically straightened sheets until his eye was drawn to a large black swathe bunched on her bedside table. A small smile pressed against his lips and, leaning over, he snatched it up and held it between his hands. Bringing it up to his face, he inhaled into the fabric.

It smelled of her now. That was for the best.

His thumbnail scraped at a spot of dirt and his smile threatened to grow wider. She hadn't washed it, and he was both moved and a little put off by the gesture.

He spread it over his hands as flashes of his previous life jumped uneasily before his eyes. Red, sparking arcs, shrieks, voices crying out….

Shaking his head stiffly, he huffed, pushing the gruesome images away. He didn't want to think of that. Not with Rey in the next room.

Can't have her see…not yet.

He sighed. The alternative was also unappealing but none the less better. He'd spent hours in their debriefing room, telling his story over and over to each new group that came in to hear it, and getting the same chastisements from each one.

'Why would you leave without Resistance go-ahead? If this is to work, you know you cannot do that again…'

'You didn't kill them? Are you sure that was wise?'

That one had surprised him the most. Every batch of officials seemed shocked he hadn't dispatched the thugs. He tried to explain they were low-level, that it would draw more attention to remove them from the board instead of swearing them to secrecy even against the Order and letting them play their game and move on.

Well, the Rebellion had always been rather blood-thirsty. Why should the Resistance be any different?

He smirked at the hypocrisy, but something about it still bothered him. He sighed, looking down at the cowl in his hands wrapped in such a strange mix of egregious and pleasant memories. So many
he'd killed wearing it. But how much Rey had needed it, and how beautiful she had looked swathed in black…

Without his notice, the water had turned off, and soon Rey was stepping into the space wrapped in an over-sized towel. His mouth shifted open at the sight but he quickly closed it again.

"That was quick," he managed to get out.

Rey huffed a laugh as she pulled open a drawer and pulled out a fresh set of clothes. She glanced over at him and delicately arched a brow at his wide-eyed look.

Closing the drawer, she turned to head back to the ’fresher. He was quick to set aside the cowl as he scooted towards the edge of the bed.

"You can change here if you want," he called after her suddenly, mildly shocked that such a desperate-sounding, not to mention particularly adolescent, suggestion had left his mouth. He frowned inwardly at himself as Rey waved her hand in front of the door switch and looked back at him with a distinct blush to her cheeks.

"No, I wouldn't want to distract you. Canteen'll close soon and we need to eat…” her voice faded away behind the swooshing door.

Ben sat there chewing the corner of his mouth.

"You can find a towel in the bottom drawer!" her muffled voice called out, and with a growl he jumped to his feet, strode the two steps to the dresser drawers, and wrenched the piece of furniture open with a snap. He snatched up the towel as Rey appeared fully dressed.

He looked at her, distinctly disgruntled, and she tried to hold back a smile.

"Go on. Your turn. And you can take your time a little, if you want. I'll have to go to your quarters and fetch your things."

Ben narrowed his eyes as he stood toe to toe with her, amusement still on her face as she looked up into the storm being held back behind his.

"You are a temptress, you know that?" he growled in a low voice.

Rey allowed a small smile. "Is that all it takes to tempt you? A little water and a big towel?" she quipped, and before she could register, his hands were at her waist, yanking her towards him as he immediately set his mouth to work against her neck, lapping and nipping at any still-moist square inch he could get his lips around. Rey gasped, clinging to him tightly.

"Oh…gods…." she murmured as her eyes slid shut. Her fingers dug in harder and he tensed in her grip as the pain filtered through. "Now who's the tempter?" she muttered, body pressing willfully close, and with a whine, she pinched him hard in the arm. He yelped, lifting his mouth away but not letting her go, and he scowled miserably as she smirked up at him.

"How many different ways do I have to tell you I'm hungry?" she said good-naturedly, swatting at his arm, and she tried to hide her fluster.

His mind finally clicked into place and the realization made him rear back slightly, his desire dampening quickly as he loosened his hold.

"I'm…sorry," he said finally, and as she smiled at him kindly, he pulled away and turned to retrieve
his towel.

*Stupid, stupid, you know how she is with food…*

"I'll be back," she said, hovering by her front door. "I shouldn't be long."

Staunchly, he nodded.

"I'm sorry again, Rey. I—"

She leaned back and smiled before letting go of the door frame and walking back up to him. She placed her hands on either side of his face, pushed up to her toes, and let her lips press to his in a soft kiss.

"Don't worry about it," she said before licking the curve of her mouth. "Later."

Ben's eyes widened as he watched her turn away and bound quickly out the door.

Looking down at the towel in his hands, he inwardly shrugged.

"Might as well."

When Rey returned, he had no qualms about walking out in what on him became a less generous portion of cloth. He could see the bob of her throat as she swallowed, eyes unashamedly glued to his still-damp chest as he slicked back his hair with one hand and slowly took his clothing from her with a catty curl of his lips.

"I swung by the canteen," she tried very hard to comment casually.

"Oh yeah?" he asked as he walked away from her, turning his back. Taking a few more steps forward, he promptly dropped his towel.

*Oh no…*

Rey hadn't gotten quite a good look at him from the back, preoccupied with other things and then the rush to leave again. And now she was gifted with a very well-defined backside indeed.

*Is he seriously cut like this from all sides?* her frustrated mind complained.

*I really hope he didn't hear that.*

*Don't worry,* came a decidedly masculine voice.

Ben pulled his pants up around his broad waist and Rey swore she heard a snicker.

"AHEM," Rey cleared her throat loudly. "Anyway, the place is packed," she continued, stuffing down her embarrassment despite her voice jumping an octave. Why was it so much harder to lock him out now?

He was mid-way pulling his shirt on when she saw him briefly freeze.

"Packed?" he asked, pulling the rest of the fabric around his torso.

"Yep!" she replied.

Ben sighed.
"There's no way I'm going in there," he said suddenly.

Rey rolled her eyes. "Ben..."

"At least in the prison block they slid meals under the door," he mumbled, and Rey snickered.

"You really mean to tell me you'd rather eat that tasteless paste than real food?"

He turned to face her with an arch of his brow. "You call that cafeteria stuff real food?"

*Not good, Ben.*

He was wincing before she had the chance to casually shrug her shoulders and look away blankly. "It's good enough."

*Ass.*

He chewed on his bottom lip with a frown as his fingers found his pockets. Hair a bit mussed, he looked up penitently at her through the bangs that fell across his eyes.

"Could they..." he hesitated. "Couldn't they just bring it here or something?"

With that, Rey tossed back her head and laughed.

"Do you really think there's room service?" she asked with an incredulous grin as she rose from her seat.

Ben looked torn, unable to settle on any one emotion.

"I won't be made into a secluded hermit," she said as she stood across from him. "And you shouldn't either."

He eyed her warily, and something told her he'd made a life-long habit of secluded hermit-ness.

"Well, if you're not coming," she said with an exaggerated sigh and shrug of her shoulders, "I guess I'll just have to go by myself."

She made a display of swinging around towards the door. "Maybe I'll bring you back a piece of fruit or something..." she said off-handedly, and she could feel the alarm ring through him as she hit the door switch.

"Wait," he called, "You're really leaving?" he asked in disbelief, voice cracking as he lurched forward.

"Yep!" she called back, and with a wave of her hand, she stepped through the door without even sparing him a glance. The door slid shut.

Her amusement laced with well-deserved annoyance still radiated towards him and he huffed.

"Scavenger."

—

Rey swung her arms contentedly as she made her way to the canteen. Somewhere in the back of her mind she liked the idea of him waiting for her back in her room.
Ben had already been assigned his own quarters. On the way there after he'd been turned back over to Rey, they'd been escorted by an administrative member of the base and were half tempted to tell the girl not to worry about it, that they'd just share…

They debated the points back and forth through the Force and Rey could feel the confusion and mild concern the girl put off every time the subjects of her task paused randomly in a corridor to make faces at one another, or when they'd randomly blurt out a word utterly out of context.

Finally deciding to play along with the charade of a room and finishing up the last of the formalities, they'd quickly made their way back to her quarters to clean up.

When she reached the canteen, few noticed her entrance and she happily slipped around the last-minute crowd and into the line. Grabbing a large napkin and a tray, she spread it out and began to eagerly pile it high with bits of dry food she could carry back.

"Rey!"

Finn and Poe were soon scooting their trays up to hers with friendly grins and she smiled widely at them.

"Hello! You're out late."

"Midnight snack," Poe quipped, ribbing Finn with his elbow who tried to smile.

"How's it gone today?" the pilot asked.

"Oh…you know," Rey shrugged, picking up a sweet pastry and adding it to pile. "The usual. It's all sorted now, though."

"So, uh, where is he?" Finn asked suddenly. "Where's Kylo," he whispered over Poe's tray.

Poe arched a brow. "We thought maybe he'd come down after…you know…"

Rey plastered a pleasant smile on her face. "He's not quite ready," she truthfully admitted. "I can't quite blame him."

"Well it's probably for the best," Finn replied quickly.

Rey slightly frowned.

"For now," Poe added, giving her an encouraging smile. "Probably feels like walking into a den of vipers at the moment."

"Possibly," she replied with a nod and a small smile. Looking down at the bounty of bread and dry meats, fruits, and a scrap of cheese, she sighed with satisfaction and began to wrap the bundle up.

"Take out?" Poe grinned.

Rey looked at him with surprise. "Yes, I'm taking it out," she chuckled.

He gave her a half smile and nodded. "Well…have a good night Rey."

Be careful, she heard him add mentally, and she held back a sigh.

"I will, Poe. Goodnight."
Giving them a wave, she turned and began to navigate the labyrinth of gathered people looking to grab a bite before closing time. She'd gotten a good haul, a little bit of everything, and she smiled contentedly as she protectively held what would be her and Ben's meal for the night.

Finn looked on beside his friend and the palm of his hand itched. Something was bothering him. Something he couldn't quite…

"Rey, wait up!" he called suddenly, and as she turned, she watched as Finn bounded up to her.

"Hi!" he said with a broad grin, and Rey gave a small laugh.

"Hi," she said back, looking him over with a confused smile.

"So ah…" he nodded towards her bundle. "You coming back after you drop that off?" he asked.

"No," she replied candidly. "It's been a long day. This is for both of us."

Finn blinked as his expression fell. "So you must really like him now," he stated more than asked.

Rey frowned slightly and tilted her head. "It's a bit more complicated than just not liking and then suddenly liking someone."

At that, Finn furrowed his brow. "How?" he asked, a bit more bite to his voice than there'd been before.

Rey arched back a bit at his question, but every answer that sprang to mind she found she couldn't tell him. It would take too long to explain the strange thing in the Force that bound them, how and why they'd needed to train together while he was locked up, why she needed to chase after him when he left….why he was staying now in her room.

Finn watched her face as she struggled to put her thoughts together. Swallowing heavily, his expression steeled.

"He's dangerous, Rey," he said stonily.

"Finn…"

"No, Rey," he objected. His voice rose, and he looked around quickly before stepping closer to his friend, resting his hands on her arms as he lowered his voice. He had to make her understand.

"….listen…please…"

Rey looked at him with concern, but as she went to speak again, he beat her to it.

"You don't know the things he did for the Order, Rey. The things I've seen him do. Has he told you? Told you what First Order propaganda taught us about the leader of the Knights of Ren?"

Desperately her mind came up blank as half-stories from trial vids tried to fill the blank, but he hadn't. He'd never said a thing. And Finn could see it on her face. His grip on her arms tightened as he came even closer and anxiety crept upon her as the look in his eyes hardened even more.

"I'm sorry, Rey," he continued. "But you need to know the truth if you're going to start hanging around him now."

Rey's mouth pressed into a thin line as she looked up at him, steely expression almost matching his. "And what would that be?" she grit out. She was too tired for this. Why was he doing this now?
Her friend's eyes became cold, unrecognizable, as he said, "That he's a murderer."

Rey scoffed and tried to turn away, but as she began to twist, he tugged her back. He wouldn't let her go.

"Rey, I mean it!" he snapped, stepping back in front of her. "He's a murderer, a brutal one. He kills women, Rey. Children? His temper is notorious. I once watched him destroy an entire control room on my second day stationed on The Finalizer because he didn't like a report he received. The officer who was just doing his job? Covered in burns from the sparks of his vicious, raging fits that took a month to heal."

Rey was biting her lower lip so hard to stop the gathering tears she swore she could taste blood. But he wouldn't stop.

"He doesn't care about his victims, and he doesn't care about his own men. And now? Now he's out. He's out of the Order and he's out of his cell, and that makes him more dangerous than ever."

She didn't know why she was still there listening to him rail. She didn't know what kept her glued to the spot to soak in everything he told her. And as she looked up at him, her vision wavered and struggled to keep him in focus. She let the tortured flesh of her lip go and it wobbled, traitorous.

"Why?" she whispered. "Why is he dangerous, Finn?"

Finn breathed in as he leveled his gaze with hers. "Because he has no one to answer to now."

"No," Rey shook her head. "You're wrong. He has the Resistance, and he has—"

Finn looked incredulously at her, his brow flicking up. "You really think he cares about what they say to him? Rey...he's a free man, no commander, nothing to adhere to..." His body suddenly became as rigid as stone. "He has nothing holding him back," Finn hissed, "to keep him from being exactly the kind of vicious monster you only got a taste of in the snow that night on Starkiller Base."

Rey gaped at him. The pain and horror sliding over her, making her feel suddenly ill. Her mind sputtered, stalled out, and it was all she could do to lift her free hand to cover her mouth when it wouldn't close as she wretched herself out of his grip and hurried out of the canteen.

Those scattered along her path eyed her curiously before looking back at Finn, wondering what he could have said to the silently sobbing woman.

Rey made her way quickly through the corridors, still somehow managing to clutch her bundle of precious food to her chest as her hand continued to clamp over her mouth. Finally finding an empty hall, she turned quickly into it before pushing her forehead against the smooth, cool wall and hissing out her sobs. She tried so hard to choke back the tears but they flowed so freely, new replacing the spent as Finn's words spun over and over in her mind.

She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream and kick and shriek but this wasn't the place. This wasn't the place and he was back in her room- she had nowhere else to go.

She thought about Him. What Leia must've had to go through, always went through, maybe still went through. But soon her thoughts turned more personal- the visions of himself he chased her with, the worse moments trying to push their way to the forefront but buckling under the weight of every tender moment they'd ever shared, every whisper of her name on his lips and the feel of him against her, in her, in all the different ways they had been within each other.
This was getting complicated. It already _was_ complicated, and _oh gods_ she really couldn't think about that right now when any second someone could find her standing pressed against the wall.

Grasping for her training, she forced herself to be calm, forced her breathing to even and her hiccuping to cease and go away. It wasn't too long before she was taking deep breaths and wiping her face with the back of her hands.

She sniffed. She knew her face would be red, but who cared—by the time she got back, she'd look back to normal. Wouldn't she? Straightening herself up, she tried to right her bundle, now slightly smushed, and she sighed heavily.

She couldn't think about all that now. Her stomach growled and she was hungry. She wanted to eat. And someone else was hungry, too. Food came first. Food _always_ came first. That was an idea Rey could attach herself to with a calm clarity.

As she approached her quarters, the space behind her door felt unerringly quiet. Steeling herself, she forced a pleasant enough expression on her face and ran her hand against the switch. When she stepped inside, she found him stood at the center of her room, arms crossed over his chest save for a large hand covering his chin. He looked miles away in thought.

"Did you behave while I was gone?" she tried to quip, looking quickly away and praying he didn't detect the quiver in her voice.

As she stepped closer, she could feel his eyes burning into her already and tried to hold herself steady as she looked up into his face again—his startlingly neutral face—and proffered the fruits of her pilfering to him. Holding out the bundle, his eyes never left hers, flicking back and forth from each of her hazels as his hands slowly rose up to gratefully take it from her with a nod of his head.

"Thank you," he replied quietly.

He gave her a small smile as he moved past her to place their food upon the low dresser. She watched as he carefully undid the knotting and began to look through the assortment. She hesitated for a moment, letting her false expression fade as she gazed at the muscles rippling in his back, watching as he finally brought up a bit of something to his mouth and took a bite. Satisfied, she let herself turn away, grabbing up her old, discarded Jakku clothing to tidy up. Once again they had served her well—more than well—as her mind kept trying to push her back to the moment his hands had fallen to her wisps, lightly tugging them free as his lips traced down her neck…

The conflicting emotions threatened to make her waste precious water all over again.

A loud bang startled her, making her jump and grip the hearty fabric in tight fists as her neck snapped in the direction of the noise. Ben had the storage stand caged, his hands gripping either end of it, as he hunched over, head hanging low. She blinked, and in his hand she spotted a piece of fruit with a single bite, juice dripping down his fingers in his tight grip. Her heart sped up as she worked to keep her face a perfect mask.

_Vicious, raging fits_, Finn had said, his words circling in her mind causing her stomach to drop.

She watched his hands and waited. Dread…

"He shouldn't have done that," he said finally, his voice a low, threatening growl.

"Do what?" she answered back, determined to hold herself steady.

He turned his head slightly to the side and she could see the glint of his eye through his bangs as it
flashed quickly towards her and away from her again. "Told you those things," he croaked.

Rey blinked, indignation slowly replacing her trepidation. Yes, that was an easier emotion. Much easier…

"So you're spying on me then?" she asked almost offhandedly, and looked back at her old clothes, pulling the fabric taught as she tried to smooth it out.

"No," he said suddenly, pushing away from the counter. He shook his head, his eyes dazed as he slowly approached her. "No, you told me not to do that. But I felt it."

Rey looked up at him then, curiosity edging its way into her expression as his eyes searched her furiously, looking for what she couldn't say.

"I felt what he said to you," he continued, eyes growing wider before they suddenly narrowed. "I felt every single impact of his words on you as if I'd been there," he nearly spat. "I felt……" Ben's eyes seemed to lose focus as he tried to think. "You reached out to me. I felt you there, whether you knew it or not. And I know what he did and it's not fair."

Rey stared up at him in shock as she watched him swallow. "It's not fair that he should try to put the whole burden, the entire iron mass of my sins onto you!"

Rey blinked. And she blinked again. But it was too late- her vision clouded over as the tears returned. Despite the difficulty, she could still see his face contort in a flicker of pain as he shook his head.

"It isn't fair…" he repeated in a whisper.

They were running down her cheeks now, and she reached, grasping for the edge of her bunk as she slowly sat down on it, her heart constricting as the sobs from the passageway came back and she slumped forward.

The iron mass of my sins…

She wept, and he didn't stop her- she doubted that he could. Daring to come closer, he knelt down before her like some sort of supplicant and her knees brushed his chest. In a moment of clarity she glimpsed his face, his expression so broken that she couldn't help the hand that clutched at the fabric covering her breast. It hurt so badly, and she wept for him, for every action he'd ever committed before she ever even knew him- every kill, every saber slash, every shattered life he'd ever taken between his hands and crushed.

She wondered, suddenly, what his fate might have been if Snoke had never found him. If he'd never been sent away. If there had never been the Force and they could have all just been left in peace. What would his life had been like? Would he have been a happier child? No Darkness swirling in the corners of a frayed mind but just wily ambition to rival his father? Or a flare for politics and a silver tongue like his mother? What would her life had been like? Would she still have a family? Was the Force somehow responsible for that, too? She could see something slip past his own cheek, and suddenly she wanted nothing more than to somehow baptize him with her own tears if she could.

And he felt it. She knew he did. He rested his hands on her knees and he let it come, the pain, as it slammed into him. He couldn't push her out if he tried, and he didn't want to, staring into her red-splotched face. Slowly, her hand rose up and fist ed into the shirt atop his shoulder and he had to look away. He knew this pain- it was intimately familiar and intrinsic to his entire life. He'd made a
career of pushing it down, deep down, though, so that it couldn't interfere with staying alive. All of the terror and the what-ifs. But to her it was fresh, and it scraped new wounds into him as he heard her consider all she knew of him, all he may have done and could have been despite the flighty bits and pieces she knew.

Her fist on his shoulder slackened slightly, and when he lifted his head again, he watched as her breathing calmed and her eyes stared determinedly into his own.

"I…" she hiccuped, closing her eyes again briefly as she worked to calm herself. "I need you to tell me. I need you to tell me all of it," she insisted with a scratchy voice.

He turned slightly, regarding her with a touch of fear as he started to lean away but she pulled roughly at his shirt.

"No!" she cried, forcing him to turn back. Gods she was so tired. And he looked…she yanked at him again.

"Maybe…" she continued with a grit of her teeth. She let go a gasping breath. "Maybe not today….no, not today," she reasoned aloud with a shake of her head. "But someday….someday soon."

She could feel him trembling beneath her hand.

"All of it," she insisted.

He huffed; she could feel him fighting it, and it tore at her more. How could he?

When she was met with silence, when he said nothing and did nothing but hang his head in front of her, the desperation and frustration twisted and tore through her and she grabbed at both his shoulders, shaking him to listen to her.

"All of it!" she half screamed.

His head snapped up and he was visibly shaking, haunted at the implications of what she wanted, at reliving it all just because she asked. He didn't even know if he could do it. He stared into the eyes of this crazed woman who had managed to utterly rip him to shreds and then found more of him to keep ripping. She was terrifying, suddenly, with her disheveled hair and wet face, hands biting into his flesh as she commanded him to bear his soul at her feet and he didn't know what to do. He didn't even know what to do. And like that, her expression softened as she gazed at him and he looked back, lost and numb. Her fingers relented and soothed the place where they had been.

"You aren't alone anymore, Ben," she pleaded, and she placed her hands against the sides of his face. Her eyes begged at him, until her head fell, exhausted, to his shoulder and he could feel fresh tears as they soaked through his shirt.

Time seemed to stop as this woman, this blinding thing, clutched to him and he couldn't breath. He tried to suck in a breath but it was like drawing in water- all he could taste were her tears and her….

He sputtered out a breath as their connection pulled taught. His hands were shaking as he brought them up and slowly, carefully, curled them around her, pulling her a little closer. He was afraid. He was terrified. Of breaking her. Of somehow grinding into nothing anything that was even left of himself. But he couldn't remember a time he'd ever felt unbroken, so maybe there was nothing left to burn?

You aren't alone anymore…
She clutched at him tighter and he let her, drawing her in close to himself until his chest pressed into hers and her legs wrapped around his waist, wrapping him in her.

He couldn't breathe because he really did taste salt- shifting against her revealed a wetness there. His own tears had soaked through to her skin.

…when did that happen?

He tensed as his fingers dug into her, squeezing her tightly. My god, did she know what she was saying to him? Did she know? He pressed her so tightly into himself he knew that he'd never escape her alive. Even if she wanted to leave him, it would be impossible now- he'd chase her for eternity, rip open the stars with his bare hands, rend entire galaxies to their nascent elements until he could hold her like this again.

Rey ached in his grasp, but when she tried to move away, she found she couldn't. Instead, his head slipped down as she shifted, pressing hard against her chest, and when her hand went to touch his cheek she found it slick. Her own tears had stopped, she realized, but the pain felt worse. Why did she still feel like her soul was splitting open?

A sound she'd never heard before choked out of him, and it all traced back to him. Her heart sank with his. Was this their fate- the good and the bad doomed to wildly ricochet between them until they couldn't take it anymore?

Perhaps they were in more trouble than she realized.

She took in a shaky breath, and slowly her thumb stroked his cheek. He was silent as he shuddered, and her arms curled around his head, holding it there against her chest, against her heart, and he whimpered as she slightly swayed with him cradled there. She didn't know why she did it, but it seemed to comfort- the action pulling from somewhere so deep she couldn't name it.

Rey didn't blink when the lights clicked off. Lowering her cheek to the top of his head, she held him.

Chapter End Notes

Ohh guys!! To anyone tiring of the fluff (if you can call it that), just....enjoy it while you can, alright? And to those of you who guessed Finn and/or Poe would come calling, well done!! xD

It was a more intimate group last chapter, which makes it my even greater honor to say THANK YOU to FrejaH, JediKnightress, lolita_iori, ReyloRobyn2011, Astro_Gobo, Karla_shadow, DasFeministMermaid, mweerden, Hormonal_Trashbag, No_Name_500, AshyWanKenobi, Nina10, CharlotteCAgain, Raxephan, Kayfoxtrot, Jacnice, lethisgo, PerfectPurgatory, Direwolves_Unite, Whoaaaaaaa, BriarRose, AnaiRees, GigiMarie, starpiercer, Tina, and DalekandtheTARDISat221B for sharing your thoughts, guesses, and kindness with me!! I always love reading what you guys have to say- I seriously feed off that stuff. So thank you all so much. ;)

So far so good with posting on Fridays! And for those who can't wait till next Friday, the next chapter of PREY will hit Patreon on Wednesday, a whole three days early, if you'd like in on it! You can do that at www.patreon.com/kagamisorciere and THANK
YOU to those of you already hanging out over there!! We hit the first Patreon goal in a couple days and I'm just...so freaking floored. I'm so excited to share all sorts of writing with y'all through that, especially original works.

Anyway, until next Friday! And be sure to let me know what you think of this chapter because there were bits of it I was literally rolling around on the floor ripping my hair out, haha! x.x
Somewhere in the thick of sleep Rey felt a brush against her stomach, something rough and bristly before skin brushed skin, as her unconscious mind registered it going lower, lower until she sensed the rustle of fabric against her legs and something hot, wet, ghosting over her center before it sharply dragged her clit against its waiting tongue and Rey *writhed*.

Ben wrapped his arms around her shifting thighs, holding her open as his lips let her go with a lascivious -*pop*- pulling back, only to duck down again and lick up slowly with the tip of his tongue. Glancing up, her eyes were still closed as her torso turned under his ministrations. He allowed himself a slight quirk at the corner of his mouth before looking back down. His mind was swimming with her- he had slept-but-not-really-slept, their consciousnesses mingling with each other until he couldn't take anymore. It had been a day, and he *missed* having her under him. Over him. He'd take her any way she wanted- he didn't care.

Furrowing his brow, he sighed and dove back down, taking as much of her as he could between his lips, suckling her folds into his mouth, and even in her sleep she was deliciously wet for him. Tongue prodding at her opening, he laved up to the tip of her again and flicked hard. She cried out, jolting in his arms. *Now* she was awake. He smirked.

Instinctively her hand found its way into his hair, her fingers burying in the dark locks as she threw her head back and panted. Her chest arched beautifully upwards and he wanted so badly to reach up and pinch the pert nipple he spied straining under her tank, but she was being too unruly, strong legs struggling in his grasp as he brushed his teeth lightly across the hood of her clit and she *mewled*. No, he couldn't spare a hand. Maybe next time he could tempt her with some sort of restraints.

Suddenly, her stomach growled. He could feel the heady vibration against his cheek and soon she was giving another kind of moan, full of irritation and annoyance. They'd missed the dinner she had brought. Maybe he should stop…

Her hand tightened painfully against his head as her fingers pulled at his hair. Looking up, he saw her sleepy face glaring furiously at him.

"If you stop, so *help* me, Ben…" she half growled, half whined, and he had to bite the corner of his mouth from laughing. He arched a brow at her as he took the order in stride, lowering his mouth back down and leaving a soft kiss at the very top of her slit.

*That's my girl…*

She fell back again. He devoured her with fervency, her muscled thighs threatening to squeeze his head like a vice when she finally came undone with a roll of her clit between his tongue and the edge of his teeth, but he held her in check, matching her strength, until she finally relaxed with a raspy sigh into the sheets. Letting her ride out her orgasm against him, he lazily spread her wetness around her folds before leaving a sultry, sucking kiss against her inner thigh and climbing up her body to hover over her prone form. Her chest rose and fell against his own as he looked down at her, smugly satisfied with his work until she cracked an eye and peered up at him. She didn't have it in her to be disgruntled with him, she found, and as his pleased eyes gazed into hers, she arched up, capturing his lips with her own, relishing the familiar taste of herself she found on them, the
taste that marked him as hers, before lifting up an arm to pull him down more fully on top of her and twining her tongue with his. Then her stomach growled, again.

She whimpered against his lips. He tucked his arms beneath her back, keeping her trapped beneath him when he pulled away.

"You should eat," he murmured quietly, mind shuffling furiously through which bit of her to kiss next. Rey groaned.

"But I don't want to…"

Her stomach, again, begged to differ. Ben smirked, and Rey could have screamed. Lifting forward, he brushed his lips against the tip of her nose.

"Come on," he chided, moving to sit up, but her arms were like steel as she pulled him back into another frenzied kiss. He wanted to ignore her stomach just as much as she did, but they really couldn't go on like this. He rolled towards the wall with her in his arms, shifting them to their sides as he successfully pulled back again.

"Come on!" he said with more enthusiasm, and worked to pry her arms from around his neck.

She whined petulantly, still sleepy and aroused and hungry and not wanting to leave her warm sheets, when suddenly his cold feet were on the tops of her thighs and physically pushing her off of the bed.

"What the kriff?" she cried. He nearly cackled at her when her legs slipped over the edge of her bed and onto the floor. Finally finding her footing, Rey groaned as she pulled herself to her feet, her stomach objecting again as she trudged her way over to the chest of drawers and began to pick her way through the food from the night before. She was thanking her stars that she'd been practical enough to only bring dry foods, foods that would survive the night. She set the cheese aside, however, learning the hard way early on that soft cheeses did not keep, as she shoved a sausage pastry into her mouth, gasping at the delicious flavor.

Ben watched her on his side from the bed, head propped on his hand with what could only be described as a wistful smile on his face. After a few more bites, she seemed to remember him there and turned back with a couple flaky bits and a piece of fruit. She lifted a leg to kneel onto the mattress and edged herself closer to him, holding out her hands as he picked out a sweet pastry and took a bite. Rey snorted.

"What?" he asked, mouth full.

"Figures you'd pick that one."

Ben snorted back, shoving the rest of it in his mouth and making a show of eating it until Rey curled her lip and tossed the small fruit at his chest.

"Hey, don't do that- you'll bruise it," he chided with a swallow, picking up the maligned produce.

"Bruise?"

"It'll turn colors because you hurt it. Plants have feelings, too, you know," he sniffed, digging his thumb into the outer peel to rip it away.

Rey stared at the thing in his hand in utter shock, and her guilt bled swiftly into him. Taking a section of the fruit, he popped it into his mouth with a grin.
"Relax, I'm joking. Not about the bruising part, but about the feelings."

But his words didn't seem to register. Rey's sleepy mind was trapped in the cycle of plants having feelings, maybe even hopes and dreams and— Ben rolled his eyes before breaking off another section of fruit and pressing it past her lips until she reflexively bit down and her eyes widened, mind snapping back to the present.

"Oh gods, this is…" she mumbled, trying to keep the juice from dribbling down her chin.

"Good, isn't it?" Ben grinned wolfishly at her as he took another bite. She gratified him with an astonished nod and he felt her desire for more. Grabbing up her hand, he placed the rest of the fruit in it before leaning forward, leaving a decidedly sticky kiss on her forehead, and climbing over her to reach the floor. Standing tall, he stretched his arms to the side, flexing them over his head and giving himself a vigorous shake before smoothing his hands down his rumpled shirt. He'd need to change. Where was his room again?

"I'll go with you," Rey commented, mouth full as she rolled over.

pleasepleasepleasecomewithme...

Rey hiccuped a laugh, letting her head fall back, and Ben blanched.

"We should probably figure out how drawing up mental boundaries works again," he grumbled, turning to the side to pick at another bit of food from the pile.

"What, you don't want me to come with you?" she fake pouted. When Ben turned his head back towards her, the burning look he gave her had her squeezing her thighs tightly as if he hadn't just made her come minutes ago already. She swallowed, blushing furiously as she looked down and occupied herself with prying the last wedge of fruit from its casing with the tip of her index finger.

A shadow fell over her and she refused to look up, until a hand appeared, palm up, next to where the husk of the fruit was clutched in her hand. He wiggled his fingers and, gingerly, she slipped her hand into his and let him pull her to her feet. She still didn't look at him, until his thumbs brushed either side of her face and she was guided upward to stare into his open face. His eyes traced over her as he smoothed his hands against her cheeks. Gaze settling on the way her ears tipped upward, his lips parted slightly.

"Thank you…" he whispered, quickly flitting his eyes her way before shifting them away again.

"…for yesterday."

Rey's expression fell into something more serious and she raised her hands to let them fall about his waist, pulling herself a little closer to his warmth.

"Ben…"

He turned to look at her.

"You can't hide here anymore," she said almost sadly. "Next place I go, you're coming."

With a sigh, he closed his eyes and shook his head. "Rey, I—"

"No," she insisted softly, gripping his shirt. "Don't fight me on this."

With another sigh, he felt her confidence thrumming at him through the bond and knew there'd be no budging her. After all, she still had her lightsaber. They'd taken his 'as a precaution' when he'd
come in. He could feel her satisfaction as he relented.

"Anyway," she began again in a more chipper tone. "last night I reserved time for us in the training gym so you really don't have much of a choice."

He peered up at her through his bangs and was greeted by her rather smug smile. Ohh, she knew how to get his attention, didn't she?

"I'm sure you're itching to flex a little muscle," she commented with the arch of a brow.

"Against you?" he asked, mirroring her expression.

"Who else?" she replied, standing a bit straighter. "Besides…I could use a teacher."

At this he froze, and Rey held her grin in nervous anticipation. She could feel shock, trepidation—did she do this wrong? He eyed her sharply and her smile began to waver in the tense silence.

Suddenly, his fingers curled around her face and he pulled her towards him, lowering his head to press his lips roughly against hers. Rey's hands shifted to grasp at his shoulders, nails digging deeply as he left no room to deepen the kiss until he relented for half a second to claim her lips more thoroughly. One of his hands slipped from her face to yank her to him by her waist, his hand drifting lower to reach across and grab a cheek of her backside and squeeze.

Both of them nearly jumped out of their skin when the door buzzed loudly, and almost on reflex Rey tried to jump back before Ben's reflex only tugged her closer. They both gaped at the closed door until it buzzed again.

whoisit

idon'tknow

whocoulditbe

goawaygoawaygoaway

Relaxing her grip on his shirt, Rey swallowed, centering herself. "I'll go…see who it is…" she said, trying to get herself back under some semblance of control, and pulled away from him to approach the room controls and hit the viewscreen.

Outside stood Petrova, briefcase under his arm, as he tapped his foot impatiently on the other side of the door. Rey turned to look at him.

"It's your advocate."

Ben narrowed his eyes. "I don't wanna see him," he complained.

Rey huffed. "Well maybe it's important."

"Impossible," he scoffed, turning away to pace the room.

Finally feeling like she was coming back to herself, Rey rolled her eyes. "Well I'm letting him in," she said as the buzzer rang through the space again. She flicked an irritated glare at the door before looking back at the man who seemed to almost be hulking at the back of her room now. "Are you ready?" she asked finally.

Taking in a few deep breaths, he ran his hand through his hair. "Fine, let him in," he said flatly,
motioning at the door.

Rey narrowed her eyes briefly before turning back and hitting the door release.

"Hello, sir!" she greeted him with a smile. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

Stepping into the room, he mumbled a greeting before spotting his client with his feet planted at the far end of Rey's room, arms crossed over his chest.

Petrova sighed- whether it was with relief or annoyance, she couldn't tell.

"I went to your quarters first, you know," he commented casually, setting his briefcase on the unused half of Rey's counter space.

Kylo narrowed his eyes, mind shuffling through all the different things he was compelled to say before biting his tongue. "What is it you want? We have floor time in the training space, so make it quick."

Somewhere, Rey scoffed.

Now you're keen to go…

Kylo glanced briefly at her and frowned.

"Well you're gonna have to put it on hold for a moment," he replied, exhaustion lacing his voice. "Because the General's calling for you. For you both," he continued, looking over at Rey.

Kylo's eye twitched at the man's gesture. Uncrossing his arms, he slowly sauntered towards him. "Then what is it you want then?" he half sneered.

Rey glared at him and he winced, closing his eyes to try and steady himself before looking slightly more plaintively at the older man. "Please?" Kylo asked, "Because I was told I wouldn't have to deal with any of this until tomorrow."

Petrova sighed. "I know. But we have to do a little preparing before then. Your status is being transferred from Prisoner of Extreme Interest to Wartime Asset."

Kylo tilted his head for him to continue. Pulling at his briefcase, Petrova opened it and flipped through some flimsies as he spoke. "This is a good thing- for you, at least. It'll mean any sort of ongoing trial will end, and as per galactic law, you won't be able to be re-tried once it's closed. Think of it as a sort of reward for your cooperation with the Resistance and the Republic."

Rey could feel his mind burning at the idea of 'cooperation' and she pushed as much acceptance towards him as she could. She didn't want to see him back in shackles, back behind a locked door. At the time, she had put the idea of the trial ending at all out of her mind because as more time passed, the more terrifying the thought became. This was good. It had to be. Gradually, she felt him ease.

Taking out a batch of flimsies, he tapped the transparent slices edge-wise against the top of his case and held them out towards his client. "Take these," he motioned towards him. "Read them before tomorrow. It's imperative. And let's get this wrapped up, alright?"

Reluctantly, Kylo look them, thumbed through them briefly, before giving the man a curt nod. "… Thank you," he said quietly.
Petrova blinked, and his eyes widened. It seemed to take him a moment to internally shake himself out the shock of this looming man actually thanking him, and after a moment, he nodded back. "Sure," he managed finally. "You're…you're welcome."

Still in a bit of a daze, Rey watched as the grizzled lawyer put his things back to order- in that he shoved them all gracelessly back into his briefcase- and buckled up the latches.

"I'll see you kids tomorrow, hmm?" he mumbled, dragging the case off the counter. "And read those please," he called back at Kylo with one last wag of his finger. Walking towards the door, he let himself out.

"Bye!" Rey called with a wave of her hand. The door slid shut.

A sigh brought Rey's attention back to the man at the other end of the room. With a weariness, he waved the flimsies before him.

"Seems I have homework," he said flatly as he approached the counter. He let the slides fall to the surface and pushed them further along.

From her spot by the bed, Rey tilted her head with a frown. "What's homework?"

—

Petrova slumped into a chair in front of Leia's desk, his briefcase dropping from his fingers with a clatter. He sighed.

"How did it go?" Leia's neutral voice asked behind clasped hands. She eyed the old advocate warily but he was always tough to read…

"I went to look for him in his quarters but he wasn't there…so I tried Rey's," he replied with a roll of his wrist.

"And?"

"He was there."

Leia smirked.

"Of course he was," she replied archly. Shaking her head, she looked back down at the flimsies strewn across her desk with a huff. "….you know, it doesn't get any easier. I know he's grown, he's…he's not the boy who was ripped from me at fifteen…..but the idea of it still makes me itch to give him a curfew or something."

Petrova snorted. "Maybe that's what made him run away to begin with."

Leia arched a brow. "Not funny," she glared.

Petrova allowed himself a smirk just as there was a buzz at her door. Instantly she stilled and the casual moment was gone. It was back to business and Petrova watched as the woman's knuckles briefly shone white.

"They're here," she said flatly.

In a moment he was back on his feet, bag in hand, but as he made his way to the door, a hiss and a pull at his arm stopped him. Turning back around, Leia still stood behind her desk with a wide-eyed look on her face.
"You can't go out that way!" she whispered, and then jabbed her thumb over her shoulder at the nondescript door behind her.

Taking the hint, he gave a curt nod before going out 'the back entrance' and the door slid shut. Leia took in a deep breath, smoothed out her shirt, before taking a seat again and willing herself together. After a handful of seconds, she hit the button on her desk and the front door flew open. Her son looked crammed in the doorway, body curved and head bumping into the top, and to the other side stood Rey- the two of them looking caught off guard in the midst of some interrupted conversation as she smiled at them from where she sat.

"Please, come in," she urged, finally standing up. She motioned towards the single plain wooden chair before her. She watched as Ben, tugging at the edges of his thin issue jacket, cleared his throat and quickly eyed Rey before testily wrenching a second chair from the side. His gaze followed the girl as she sat and he placed the second a cautious distance away before taking his own seat. He was too large for the chair, and Rey almost seemed too small. His elbows balanced precariously on the hard armrests while Rey held her hands clasped in her lap with nowhere to put them. They were the picture of two people trying very hard not to look obvious about how strange the newfound distance between them was. Rey beamed up at her nervously and Ben looked down and away. Leia suppressed a smirk as she balanced over her desk on her knuckles watching the display. She tilted her head slightly.

"Don't hold back on my account, you two," Leia said finally.

Rey's face suddenly blanched, but Ben just grunted until there was a loud creak and then a pronounced -snap- as the armrest on his chair closest to Rey broke loose in his grip and he dropped it to the floor with a clatter. With a frustrated sneer, he shoved his chair closer to Rey's before dropping himself back into it again and used the new access to put his arm around her waist and tug her closer. Rey stared at him in shock, and Leia didn't think the poor girl could go any whiter if she tried. Ben eventually stared back, and a silent exchange seemed to pass between them before some of the color came back to the girl's cheeks and she watched as Rey slowly, gradually settled against his side.

Her son then met her eye, his face the picture of blankness she'd come to know since he arrived. Rey became terribly preoccupied with the floor, the gentle blush across her cheeks creeping over more of her face.

Leia hadn't been this entertained in years.

"I've called you in this morning," she began, slowly taking a seat, "to let you know what to expect in the meeting tomorrow."

"Petrova already gave me a stack of flimsies," Ben stated, as if that were the end of it. Leia shook her head.

"Yes, those are the particulars, but like everything," she continued with a sly smile, "there is a strategy. Key words you should use. Expressions best to say. And I want to help you prepare."

Rey was watching her now, her curiosity getting the better of her. She knew she had never really dealt with the political side of the Resistance, or the New Republic for that matter. But she seemed to absorb it all like a sponge.

Ben frowned slightly and at that look that called back more to Kylo Ren than her flesh and blood son, her heart beat a little faster and she reminded herself again that he was back now…
"Why would you do that?" he asked.

Leia worked to control her conflicting emotions and schooled her face with a slight smile before her eyes fell briefly on Rey.

"You asked me once if you actually had some sort of future 'to get acclimated to', as I think you put it."

She watched as his mouth tensed but her eyes softened as she gazed at him. At the both of them.

"I think, now…now perhaps you do."

He swallowed hard and Rey's eyes widened. His grip around her tightening.

"Let me help you," she whispered passionately. "Let me help you have that future."

Ben stared at his mother in mild shock. Rey's hand crept to rest on the top of his leg, discretely grabbing at the loose fabric. He looked down at her and she looked back, a slight shine to her eyes. She gave him a small smile and seemed to nod. His jaw shifted as he looked down at her. His chest rose and fell with every breath.

He turned away, looking down at his mother's desk, lost to himself for a moment, before looking up to meet her hopeful, loving gaze. He seemed to flinch, almost imperceptibly, as he did so, but taking in a deep breath, he let it go again.

"What would you have me know?"

Leia smiled.

Afterwards, after they were long gone, Officer Haldeg came in brandishing the latest intelligence report.

"General, I have—" he stopped dead, looking at the broken chair and the mess on the floor. Leia hadn't even moved from her work. "What happened in here?" he asked in confusion.

At this, Leia looked up. "Hmm? Oh," she replied. "My son was here," she stated, as if it explained everything. Perhaps it did.

Officer Haldeg blinked, taking a moment to piece together what had just been said to him before the meaning fully registered.

"Oh," was all he could say, before remembering what was in his hand, "Oh," he said again, and then it was back to business as he side-stepped the small pile of splinters.

"Anyway, I have today's Report," he said, clearing his throat.

Leia gave him a pleasant expression and held out her hand to receive it. "Please."

—

Others on the base watched as Rey and Kylo Ren…Ben Solo? His helmet was missing…walked like the best of friends down through the corridors. No one had ever seen Rey chatter away so incessantly- at least they'd never seen her so animated with the pilots and techs she was normally seen with. And Kylo Ren…he didn't seem to mind it. In fact, he looked almost…pleased.

The whispered confusion quickly spread through the base at what others had witnessed, how Rey
had laughed and swatted him in the arm as they made their way to their unknown destination, and how Kylo's smile- he *smiled*- looked too much like Han Solo for some peoples’ comfort…

The gossip especially made its way to the hanger where Rey was known best, and Poe listened intently to the stories swapped around. He couldn't quite settle on any one emotion. Amused? Skeptical that whatever they’d seen had been blown out of proportion? In the end what he was left with was concern and a heavy dose of curiosity. Wiping the grease off his hands, he put down the cloth and quietly made his way out of the hangar to investigate. He wanted to see this for himself.

For Rey's sake, of course.

—

"No," he insisted. "Next time I catch you up like that, Rey, you *must* reach out against me with the Force."

The two of them were pouring with sweat in the practice hall as he critiqued her last attack.

"You *must* fight with both the saber *and* the Force," he breathed. "Don't ever squander the tools at your disposal."

Rey panted, jutting the tip of her wooden practice sword into the mat and leaning over it briefly to catch her breath, nodding wordlessly. She'd been trying- it was a difficult rhythm to pick up- but she could feel his almost overwhelming belief in her ability to do it. Part of her was flattered he thought so highly of her potential, but she was becoming wary of his over-confidence.

"Come on," he said flatly, and hoisted his practice sword back up into a defensive position.

They didn't notice the careful open and close of the outermost door to the practice space.

Rey groaned as she clutched her wooden sword and let herself hang down, gripping her side and half hoping the jab of her fingernails would give her a bit more energy for whatever more he had in mind.

"What's the matter?" Ben called, and she could almost feel the cajoling in his voice. She lifted her head just enough to raise a brow at him, but all he did was shoot her back the briefest look of warning before, with a shout, he came at her again, and again- sucking in a breath- she dodged and parried.

Peering through window of the last set of doors was as close as Poe dared to get. His fingers hit the disabling switch to turn off the motion sensor- not to mention it doubled as a decent enough defense, he thought, if he got caught spying. The more he watched this…dance…however, the less likely that seemed possible.

And dance they did.

They moved across the floor in steps that should have seemed archaic until Rey would get briefly cornered and jab, or Kylo would seem to get overwhelmed and swing blindly. In one moment, Rey would laugh, and in another, her opponent would say something so out of the blue that it left Poe stumped. Until, suddenly, it dawned on him. They were *communicating*, they could *communicate*, somehow, without speaking, and he was only hearing bits of what must've been an otherwise lively conversation.

*Is that the Force then?*, he pondered to himself, and with a shockingly delicate knock to her sword, he watched in awe as Kylo gave his sparring partner a look that could almost be described as *sweet*
although shouldn't that be impossible? Shouldn't Kylo Ren be incapable of something so… pedestrian…as 'sweet'?

A series of inexplicable facial expressions were exchanged between them when Rey raised her sword again, and this time Poe watched without pretense as they sliced and lunged. Their movements were getting tighter, and Kylo laughed when Rey swung her sword and the very air of the strike seemed to push him several feet back.

"Just like that!" he praised, and lunged for her when Poe heard a quiet hiss and spun around, nearly slamming his back into the metal wall of the corridor.

"Sh—! Maker! Finn!" Poe hissed, and ducked down, waving his hand for his friend to follow suit. Reflexively, Finn did before joining him against the same wall as he too became distracted by the two figures sparring in the room inside.

"What are you doing here?" Finn finally asked.

"Me? What are you doing here? I thought you were on sim shift?"

"I was, but then I heard a bunch of talk about Rey and…and him," he motioned with his chin, "skipping down the hallway together and I…." he sighed. "I just wanted to make sure she was alright."

Poe gave a small purse of his lips as he gripped his friend's shoulder comfortingly. "Yeah, I…I heard it didn't go so well last night. What the hell happened anyway?"

Finn shook his head and eyed the two fighters through the glass. Risking it, he took a step closer, trying to position himself to get a better view, until Poe's hand stopped him. Wordlessly they shared a warning look before turning to watch together.

Rey moved lithely across the floor while Kylo came for her with a manic, brutal grace, both grunting with the effort it was taking to stave the other off. They were equally matched, the bout so enthralling that it seemed even Finn started to forget that it was Kylo Ren on the other side of the door. The other man's back stayed to him, until their locked weapons caused Rey to fling him around, and upon seeing his face, reality slammed back into Finn quickly. He tensed.

As Rey went for a rather obvious overhead attack, Kylo didn't seem to care, fending her off with a small grin as he seemed to yank his arm free of nothing and easily parried her incoming blow. Poe grinned.

"They're doing it again," he said.

"Doing what?"

"I don't know how…." Poe mused, "…maybe it's a Force thing. Yeah, that's gotta be it…but they're definitely talking somehow. You can see it, there, in their faces when one of them says something and the other replies. I've seen them finish conversations that never even began, too."

Finn squinted at him. "Just how long have you been standing here anyway?"

Poe tore his eyes away from the spectacle long enough to give him his best innocent look when suddenly Rey gave a loud shout and they turned in unison just in time to see her trip spectacularly only to be caught in Kylo's arms. They stared in shock. Grabbing her up, he stunned them both when he laughed. He laughed. And none of this- none of it- felt right as Finn felt glued to his hiding spot by the window. Meanwhile Rey was cursing up a storm, cursing at him for what was
apparently a dirty trick, and cursing at herself for not seeing it, and as she struggled to right herself, his hands found their way to her waist.

"You bastard! I could have smashed my face into the floor, do you realize that? I could have spent a week with the nurses- what kind of teacher are you? What kind of a teacher—" she panted angrily between breaths, but he had no reply in the midst of his amusement. When she looked up at him, his face was the picture of calm.

"...Ben?" she asked, but there was nothing but the gentlest tug at her waist, bringing her a sliver of a fraction closer to him, and this time when she looked up into his eyes, the world fell silent.

Her brow unknit and her mouth relaxed. Nothing. She heard nothing. But the sound of his heart beat.

But then again. Wasn't it her heartbeat, too?

The connection….it had changed again.

Her hand found its way to his chest. It gripped onto his training shirt- to steady herself or to make better contact she couldn't say. Maybe both. But she couldn't look away from his eyes, and seeing that she had found the same thing he had he could do nothing but pull her closer. Like some sort of siren song, there was no longer any room for words, just feelings, and as his hand flinched slightly to skim the flesh at the edge of her shirt, she let the spark his touch ignited drown her completely. But this time he was there to meet her, and as her consciousness melted into his, he brushed his lips softly onto hers before crushing her in a kiss.

As her hands wound themselves around his neck and her fingers into his hair in what was obviously a mutual embrace, all Poe could do was rub a hand against his cheek as the surprise refused to budge from his face.

"Ohhhh boy..." he murmured.

He looked at Finn, whose expression was so cryptic he couldn't begin to read it. This was definitely going to be trouble.

Chapter End Notes

I have written and re-written this over and over again over the past year. I could give a laundry list of excuses, so I will try not to.

The biggest was my life getting ruined by a guy for a good long while. I sort of…live my stories as I write them. Some of my best chapters were written like notes from watching a movie, because it was playing out in front of me more than something printed out in black and white. This makes the emotions intensely personal. I was sobbing at the keyboard trying to just go through old chapters to write a little for the new one- it was too close. My friend is evidence, as one of the times I was crying at her coffee table trying to write for this story and I just had to close my laptop and eat more of my eggs in an attempt to forget. The problem is I fell into my own star-crossed romance, except I didn’t win. I didn’t win at all. It was gross and a mess. Oh well.

At one of the lowest points during this time I received a call to work on something that
Adam himself was working on. It kinda saved me—can’t have bad thoughts or feel bad things if you know you’re gonna be around the man himself all day. Or several days, as ended up being the case. But like all things, it was a double-edged sword. After being exposed to Reality, suddenly the fan-built fiction around him on the more extreme ends made me feel really uncomfortable. Suddenly online I was faced with overhearing peoples’ bizarre conversations about someone I had worked with, someone who had shown me a kindness or two. Someone whose work ethic I’d come to highly, highly respect. It got quite uncomfortable for me, but at the same time I couldn’t say anything. Still can’t, really. I needed to step away from the fan community and sort my thoughts out after the job ended. Unfortunately I’ve never really come back all the way because the cringe factor got worse while his play was on Broadway. I have a lot of empathy for them. I have been first in line to cook up crazy stories about Kylo Ren and Ben Solo, but I draw the line at the man behind the mask. I always have. That job cemented that line into unmovable granite.

A good deal of time has passed since the last chapter, though. I’m still healing from what I went through, and in some ways my emotions are a bit deadened these days—all part of the healing process probably. Maybe I’ll feel something again. Reading some of you guys’ stories lately has helped. Maybe writing will help. In the mean time, I want to apologize if anything feels a bit stiff and doesn’t flow quite as well as the first half of the story. But I’m trying. And it’ll get better. And if you’re still kicking around this old fic, know that I appreciate you. I appreciate you a lot. Thank you, for everything. The rest of this story, popular again or not, is for you.

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